

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE COLLAPSED GROTTO





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
COLLAPSED GROTTA**

Jupiter, Pete and Bob find themselves on the site of an abandoned sanatorium damaged by an earthquake more than twenty years ago. There they notice a person acting suspiciously. They follow him into the building and discover a transport container containing a valuable and live ornamental fish. The Three Investigators decide to investigate this and the trail leads to a collapsed grotto situated below the abandoned site. However, they soon realize that the case is not as straightforward as they think when they discover an unexpected plot twist.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Collapsed Grotto

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1. A Man Disappears

A branch cracked under Pete Crenshaw's foot. The noise startled a bird, which cawed a few metres away and fluttered from its resting place towards the rock face.

The bird flew close to Bob Andrews, who was walking in front. He winced. "Geez, Pete, watch it!"

Jupiter Jones held his camera in his hand and tried to photograph the bird flying away against the background of an old, densely overgrown wall. The snapshot succeeded, which made Jupiter grin with satisfaction. "You have done our project a great service, Pete. The photo turned out excellent."

"At least someone appreciates my ingenious plan," said Pete with dignity, who of course had not planned anything at all, but had just stepped on the rotten branch purely by chance.

The Three Investigators were on a small island off Long Beach. It was so close to the mainland coast that it could be reached via a bridge.

Most of the island was taken up by a nature reserve, through which a few hiking trails led. On the remaining area stood the ruins of a very exclusive sanatorium where, until twenty years ago, people with enough money had been able to receive therapy to recover from their illnesses. Since a catastrophe had made the building uninhabitable, it had stood empty and was falling more and more into disrepair. A large grotto under the building had collapsed during an earthquake—only by a miracle had the whole sanatorium not sunk into the depths.

A high wire-mesh fence protected the compound from unauthorized entry. There was a gate secured with a thick chain and a large security lock. In some places, the fence ran quite close to the once noble, stuccoed façade and the columns that supported small canopies over side entrances. Ivy climbed up the columns and moss carpets grew in shady places.

This enchanted atmosphere offered ideal conditions for the photo project that the three boys were currently working on. The school's assignment was to take photographs of a historical building and highlight the special features of the history of this structure through the photos.

The friends had thought long and hard about which building to choose, until Pete remembered a climbing trip he had made last year in the cliffs opposite the small island. From there, he had seen the crumbling sanatorium perched on the hill and planned to go sightseeing there at some point.

His friends were immediately enthusiastic about their selected building. Unfortunately, a detailed inspection was prevented by the high fence. In addition, several signs warned of the danger of collapse, for instance:

Danger! Entry Strictly Forbidden!

Pete went on. They wanted to walk completely around the ruins. At the moment, they could look at the main entrance. To the side of it, between the rocks, the sea could be seen when the Second Investigator looked in that direction.

Suddenly, something caught his eye. "Look, up ahead there!"

"The Coast Guard boat?" asked Juve. "I saw that too. Do you think they patrol here routinely? Or do you think they're looking for something in particular?"

Bob grinned. "They're probably lying in wait for three guys who end up climbing over the wire-mesh fence in search of the perfect snapshot."

"I didn't mean the boat," Pete clarified, "but that guy there, with the short leather trousers and the tattoos on his forearms. He's far away, but I think the tattoos are Chinese dragons."

"Oh, he's just a hiker who wants to go to the nature reserve," Bob surmised. "He probably owns the grey panel van you parked next to."

"It was brown," Jupiter corrected.

"Look!" Pete involuntarily spoke more quietly, as if the man could hear him, even though he was much too far away. "He's ducking! He's hiding from the Coast Guard!"

"Indeed," said Jupiter.

At that moment, the boat disappeared from sight. Immediately afterwards, the stranger continued his way along the fence, reached a small group of trees and could no longer be seen.

"Strange..." the First Investigator murmured as the boys also started moving ahead towards where the stranger was. After all, it was the direction they had wanted to go along as they circled the property.

Some time later, they reached the end of the footpath. At this point, the sanatorium had been built close to a huge rock wall that rose almost vertically. The fence led towards it, ran parallel to this wall a little further and finally ended at it.

Between the fence and the ruins here lay a small garden that had undoubtedly been well tended in the past. Pete imagined the rich patients who relaxed in the shade on deckchairs against the grandiose backdrop of the rock face towering at least twenty metres high. At the moment, waist-high thistles and all kinds of other weeds grew there in a far less idyllic way.

"Dead end," Bob said after taking a few photos. "Let's go back."

"Not necessarily a dead end," Jupiter said.

Bob pointed ahead. "—And where are you going to squeeze through? The fence runs right into the rock wall here, the last post is even embedded in—"

"Didn't you see the hole cut in the fence not ten metres behind us?"

"You want to enter the grounds?" asked Bob, puzzled.

"Only because of the good photos you can take there, of course," said the First Investigator as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"It's dangerous, Juve," Pete warned. "No one knows how stable the building is after the grotto collapsed... and the fact that everything has been rotting for twenty years doesn't make it any better."

Jupiter waved it off. "We will be careful and not enter the ruins. We are supposed to present the history of the building for the project. We'll have to look at the ruins through the eyes of one of the former patients, and they used to sit there in the garden."

"Our friend here actually wants to climb through a hole in the fence," Pete noted.

Bob was beginning to like the idea. "Let's go. If there's already a way through, we won't be the first to use it."

"—Which doesn't mean it is right to do so," objected the Second Investigator.

"In the first place, we did not cut the hole, it's already there," Jupiter clarified, "and now we shouldn't waste any more time. We keep a proper distance from the dangerous area... and that's what the warning signs are all about. So let's go, fellas! Besides... doesn't something seem strange to you?" Juve pointed to the rock wall.

"What do you mean?" asked Pete.

"Where is the man from before?" Juve wondered. "When we saw him, he was walking along the fence as we just did, and there was the rock wall looming up on the side. He

couldn't leave without turning around, and in that case he would have passed us... but he didn't! If we assume that he didn't climb up this vertical rock wall, then there is only one other possibility—he went through the hole in the fence. I wonder what he's doing at the ruins. Certainly he's not taking photos for a school project.”

They went back. At the fence, someone had indeed cut the mesh and bent it to the side. The First Investigator squeezed through. His two friends followed and the three of them walked through the garden towards the former sanatorium. Most of the windows were boarded up. Strange plants were already growing on some flat canopies as if nature was reclaiming the grounds.

“I just thought of something,” Pete said. “This guy could be the owner after all, and if he sees us, he won't be too thrilled.”

“Quiet!” demanded Jupiter, who had been keeping an eye on the surroundings. “Come with me!”

He hurried to some thick bushes and took cover behind them. Pete followed, then Bob.

“The man is standing over there by the old statue!” Jupiter said. “—And now he's entering the ruins... through one of the windows that isn't boarded up. The window seems to be smashed, see?”

“That's none of our business,” whispered Pete, as he didn't like this at all.

“I want to know what he is up to there. If he is actually the owner, I guarantee he would take a different route. This is... trespassing.”

“It's dangerous to follow him into the ruins!” said Pete, but by then the First Investigator was already on his way, close to the wall of the building.

Bob looked at Pete. “We can't leave him alone. So come on, let's go.”

When they caught up with him, Jupiter was already peering through the window. He turned to his friends. “The man is in there and has crossed the large reception hall very purposefully, as if he knew exactly where he was going. There seems to be some kind of spiral staircase back there, but I can't make it out exactly. It's too dark. There is only a little light coming into the building.” Jupiter looked inside again. “He's gone downstairs.”

“Now what?” asked Bob.

“Take a good look at this first,” the First Investigator demanded. “This window was not simply smashed. The edges are neatly cleared of shards. Besides, there are no splinters lying around. That's a pretty convenient way into the building, and it looks like it's been used quite often.”

Jupiter braced himself, swung his left leg over the window sill first, and a breath later, he was inside the forbidden ruins.

“Here we go again!” Pete groaned and exchanged a glance with Bob. “This can't be happening!”

Bob shrugged his shoulders and out of necessity, the two of them followed their friend.

2. A Thousand-Dollar Fish

The air smelled musty. The Three Investigators found themselves in the large reception hall of the former luxury sanatorium.

They were standing on the remnants of an old, decrepit carpet. The ceiling was two storeys above them and on the side walls, in the semi-darkness, were remains of ornate railings, behind which probably were the corridors leading to the patients' rooms. It was ostentatious architecture, but quite impressive, they had to admit.

When Pete's eyes had become more accustomed to the dim light, he recognized a metal support beam far above him, half torn out of the ceiling. This was impressive in a different way.

The man with the tattoos was nowhere to be seen. The First Investigator took the lead towards the spiral staircase where he had seen the stranger gone to. The steps wound up and down in wide circles, completely unsecured.

"Pretty dangerous," Pete said quietly.

"Maybe they took down the railing when the sanatorium was abandoned after the grotto collapsed," Bob explained. "I read that the owner took everything of value that could somehow be reached and dismantled. The rest was probably looted in the months that followed."

"The non-valuable things?" asked Pete sceptically. "Why would anyone take them?"

"Well, we're talking about toilet paper holders and wall lamps or something like that." Bob had read some articles about the old sanatorium the day before to prepare for the visit.

In one newspaper report, the reporter had admitted that his parents also had a souvenir—a gold-plated bath plug that his father had picked up on a foray. In the first months after the collapse, the current ruins had not yet been fenced off and it had been considered chic to secure any souvenir. Even socket covers had been popular as souvenirs.

After that, a security service had patrolled the area for a long time to put an end to these activities. The owner, whose name Bob could not recall, had repeatedly drawn attention to the danger in public appeals, that the whole sanatorium could collapse if further parts of the grotto gave way.

"We are here because of the man we saw," Jupiter reminded his friends. With these words, he climbed down the steps. It was even darker on the stairs than in the reception hall.

When they were one floor below, in the lower ground floor, The Three Investigators discovered no trace of the stranger. Daylight fell through a wide double window. Apparently the sanatorium stood on sloping ground.

"I wonder where the entrance to the grotto is," Bob said. "The grotto was where the dolphin assisted therapies took place." He had remembered this detail in particular because he thought the idea was so interesting.

Dolphin assisted therapy was a type of treatment for people suffering from various developmental disorders. Here, patients interacted with or swam with live captive dolphins. Some regarded that the sounds that dolphins emitted during the therapy sessions had a profound impact on one's well-being.

Bob dug out from his pocket an old map of the sanatorium which he had printed from the Internet so that he could show it at their photo presentation at school. He glanced at the map, took a moment to find his way around it, and then looked around searchingly. "The entrance to the grotto must be back there."

After a few steps, Bob stood in front of a massive swing metal bar gate, secured by a thick security lock. Behind it was a rather narrow staircase leading straight down, bordered on both sides by tiled walls. A red sign on gate again announced that entry to the staircase was strictly forbidden and that there was danger.

The Three Investigators peered through the bars of the gate. About twenty steps were exposed before the stairs ended at a mountain of rubble and rocks.

"Just as I read," said Bob. "The staircase collapsed along with the grotto in the earthquake back then. When you look at it like that, it's really a miracle that the building remained standing."

Jupiter turned around and pointed to the window. "That could be where the guy climbed out," the First Investigator said. "Look! There is something by the window. Do you see it?" Of course he didn't wait for an answer, but already set off.

Under the window, which was completely undamaged and pushed halfway up, was a container made of white plastic, with metal-reinforced edges. It was cube-shaped, with an edge length of about fifty centimetres. A carrying handle curved over it.

"A transport container," Jupiter said. "The man definitely didn't have this with him just now. With this size, we would have noticed. Did he come down here because he wanted to get this container?" The First Investigator sensed a mystery. "—But then why is it still here?"

"Maybe it's been here for some time," Bob said. "In any case, the man wasn't interested in it."

"There is not a bit of dust on it," Jupiter explained. "This container has been here for a few days at most or..." He broke off in mid-sentence and pushed the carrying handle to the side to be able to remove the lid. To do this, he also had to undo two latches.

"Jupe, I don't think it's any of our business!" said Pete.

"Hmm..." Jupiter muttered while he unmovedly undid the latches. The lid didn't come off until Jupiter made an effort to lift it up. "Take a look at this. Most interesting."

Bob looked in as well. "No way!"

"Fellas, this thing is becoming more and more mysterious," Jupiter commented enthusiastically. "Can you explain to me why a fish is making its rounds in a special transport container in this abandoned place?"

"A fish?" Pete repeated. "Are you serious?" He pushed Jupe aside to take a look inside himself. The container was a good half-filled with water, and there was indeed a fish swimming in it. It had a torpedo-shaped body of about five centimetres long. What was most striking was the orange and red longitudinal stripes spanning the head, body and fin.

"A nice colourful guy," Pete remarked. "I like it."

"Not only you," said the First Investigator.

"I can tell by your tone," Bob said, "that you don't just mean you think it's nice and colourful as well."

"That's right, Bob. This is an ornamental fish and I'm sure it is called the candy basslet."

"Looks a lot like a candy cane," Pete said, "an orange and red candy cane."

"It's a rare fish, and therefore a valuable one. There are different price ranges for this species, but I would bet that this one here is worth several hundred dollars, maybe even a thousand." This left his friends speechless.

“Let’s summarize—the stranger hides from a Coast Guard patrol, enters the forbidden ruins, walks purposefully downstairs, but does not take the container with the thousand-dollar fish. Since this is not exactly a place where many people hang around, and the man has come exactly here of all places, the suspicion is that he knew about this container.”

“We’re here too,” Pete pointed out, “and we didn’t know anything about it.”

“—Only because we were following the stranger,” Bob said.

“True again, but that means the guy will surely be back soon. Maybe he’ll get a second container. No one just puts such a valuable fish down here and then goes away. We should get out of here before he—”

“A second container? Interesting thought,” Jupiter said, “and it’s certainly true that this container probably won’t stay here for long. The fish can only survive in it for a limited time.”

“I can think of at least a dozen other things we could talk about,” Bob said, “but Pete’s right—it could all be a strange coincidence somehow, but until that’s proven, it seems much more likely to me that foul play is behind it—a theft of this precious fish or whatever. Anyway, we should get out of here before someone sees us!”

“Are we taking the fish?” asked Pete.

Jupiter shook his head. “Not a good idea. We don’t want anyone to see that we were here. We’ll keep watching, but well-hidden... and wait to see if the man shows up again... or if someone else picks up this container, and if so—”

“Let’s get out of here first!” the Second Investigator urged, and this time none of his friends caused any further delay.

Jupe put the lid back on the container as before. Then they went back up the spiral staircase and peered into the reception hall. No one was to be seen there. The Three Investigators quickly discussed how they should split up.

Bob wanted to stay in the building and keep an eye on the hall, preferably from the corridors on the upper floor. He didn’t like the idea of climbing up in the dangerous building, but he decided to do it. Behind the railings there, he saw an alcove that looked like a good hiding place.

Already on the stairs, Bob watched every step to see if the steps looked safe, and even more so at the top of the corridor itself. The decrepit railing that protected against a fall from a height of about four metres did not look particularly confidence-inspiring.

Bob’s heart slipped as he cautiously walked to the alcove through which corroded pipes ran. As he had hoped, it offered him good cover and just about perfect visibility into the hall without him being seen himself.

Jupiter wanted to take cover outside the building and keep an eye on the hole in the fence. There was a good chance that the man would also leave the property this way. However, if he took another route, he would surely go to his vehicle—which meant, hopefully, it was the brown van in the public car park. That was why Pete wanted to position himself there and keep his eyes open. If necessary, the Second Investigator would get into his car and follow the man as inconspicuously as possible.

As soon as one of them spotted the stranger or anyone else who took the container or behaved suspiciously, he was to inform the other two with a text message using his mobile phone.

While his friends climbed out through the window, Bob remained in his hiding place at the alcove.

It became quiet.

Bob thought why on earth would anyone bring a fish, no matter how valuable it was, to this bizarre place in a container. Even if the fish had been stolen, Bob could think of a thousand other places where it could be stashed far better than in an abandoned sanatorium on a deserted island.

On the other hand, maybe that was exactly the reason. No one came to this place, so it was ideal for conducting shady business. The container could probably be left there for days without anyone noticing. Had they discovered the temporary storage facility of an illegal animal trader?

Suddenly there was a rumble and a thunderous noise.

Bob startled and hit his head on one of the pipes. He feared that the echoing sound would be heard throughout the ruins. So much for hiding inconspicuously and watching in secret... On the other hand, the noise from below drowned out everything anyway. They were tremors like that of an earthquake!

The grotto! Was it possible that more parts were collapsing, just like back then? Bob could imagine it vividly... all too vividly as he stood squeezed between the pipes in the alcove! What if the floor collapsed from under him?

Then there was a boom, like a car crashing through the wall! Didn't the ground shake?

Bob forgot all caution, left his hiding place and ran—glad that there was still something he could step on. He hurried down the spiral staircase, missed a step in the rush, lost his balance, flailed his arms, just managed to catch himself and reached the reception hall.

He forced himself to breathe calmly, rushed to the window, climbed out into the open and ran across the grounds towards the hole in the fence.

3. At the Oceanarium

Pete found a reasonably comfortable spot at a fallen tree. It was behind some bushes and far enough away from the island's public car park that he could keep an eye on the van without being spotted himself. Should the tattooed stranger appear, he could also take cover by crouching on the ground behind one of the wider bushes. If the man didn't go off straight away, Pete could continue to observe him...

Suddenly, there was a movement! The Second Investigator involuntarily held his breath. Then he heard somebody running, and he was sure that it was more than one person. He took a peek from the bushes... and saw that it was Bob and Jupe—running to the car park.

Pete immediately stood up and waved them over.

"What's wrong?" Pete asked, as soon as Bob reached him. Seconds later, Jupe also came up to them, puffing and panting.

"I felt a tremor in the ruins..." Bob said, "or at least I heard noise with which other parts of the grotto under the sanatorium may have collapsed."

"What?"

"I didn't notice anything in the garden, though," Jupiter clarified, "and according to Bob's observations, the building itself was not affected."

Pete directed his friends to hide behind the wider bushes for better cover, because the stranger should not notice them under any circumstances.

"I know how strange that sounds," Bob said. "Maybe it wasn't as loud as it seemed to me. Anyway, I heard what I heard. I thought it was all over and the whole sanatorium was going to collapse."

"There were no tremors," Jupiter insisted. "I would have noticed that. Pete, did you hear anything out here?"

"No," Pete replied. "It was all quiet here."

"After Jupe's sceptical questioning, however," Bob continued, "I am now uncertain that there really were tremors. I may have imagined them and thought that it was a small earthquake. If it wasn't... then maybe another part of the grotto under the sanatorium collapsed. Oh, what do I know! In any case, it was a huge rumble!"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Pete, as he heard another movement. "Keep you heads down! Somebody's coming."

However, it was not the stranger, but two men! They came from the shore, not from the direction of the bridge, but probably from a boat—perhaps the one the three boys had seen earlier. At least that was what their Coast Guard uniforms suggested. They were talking, but too far away for the three boys to hear what they were saying. Was it a coincidence that they came to the island now? Or did it have something to do with the fish?

The two guardsmen did not notice the boys. Pete wondered whether he and his friends should walk towards them when, all of a sudden, he saw the stranger approaching from the ruins.

"Look!" Pete whispered. "It's the tattooed man again!"

They saw the man walking calmly to his van... and why not? Either he had done nothing wrong or he did not feel being followed and was therefore safe. However, when he suddenly

noticed the two uniformed men, he flinched, scurried to the side, and took cover behind some bushes.

That man was clearly hiding from the Coast Guard! Should The Three Investigators intervene? Should they make themselves noticed and draw the guardsmen's attention to the stranger?

However, the coast guardsmen were already too far away. They walked with quick steps in the direction of the nature reserve.

When the uniformed men were no longer in sight, the tattooed man left his hiding place and went straight to the brown van. He took his key out of his pocket, opened the driver's door and got in.

Pete got ready. As soon as the man left the car park, he wanted to sprint to his MG and give chase.

The next moment, the van's engine rattled and then rolled off.

"I'm going after him," Pete said. "Are you two coming?"

"Let's get off the island before anything else happens!" Bob said.

"Not so fast!" Jupe objected. "We'll have another look around the ruins and then keep an eye out for the men from the Coast Guard."

Pete forced himself to wait a few more seconds before hurrying to his car. He started up and left the car park as well. The stranger would have to drive to the bridge first, because that was the only way out of the island. This would give the Second Investigator enough time to follow at some distance seemingly at random. Only on the mainland would it become tricky to keep up, especially if he went towards Los Angeles. From Pete's experience, tailing a vehicle was very tedious in the big city.

When the Second Investigator drove onto the bridge, the van was already at the other end. The left indicator was blinking, so the van was indeed going in the direction of Los Angeles.

Pete also turned there about thirty seconds later and managed to keep a good eye on the van. Fortunately, the road was not busy, which allowed him to keep a safe distance behind. As soon as they approached LA, it would be a different story.

A few minutes later, the van put on its indicator to turn into the next street... no, it was into a small car park. The Second Investigator immediately knew that he too had to turn into the car park as on this road, he could neither stop nor turn anywhere. However, if the man noticed him, he might realize in retrospect that the MG had been following him since the bridge.

There was an information board in the car park, a few metres away from where the van had just come to a stop. The Second Investigator took advantage of this to attract as little attention as possible. He drove past several parked cars and stopped in front of the board. A few people were walking around and stretching.

In the rear-view mirror, Pete watched the stranger get out and stand by his van. He also got out and pretended to study the map that showed an overview of Los Angeles and the surrounding area. Every now and then, he glanced back at the man, who was now talking on his mobile phone.

When the man got back inside his van, the Second Investigator also went into his car. Before continuing the pursuit, he grabbed the mobile phone and tapped the First Investigator's number. "The guy's heading for LA now."

"Okay, hang on," Jupiter urged. "We are now back at the sanatorium. Call you later!"

The pursuit led Pete into the outskirts of Los Angeles, but fortunately not onto the busiest streets. He maintained the pursuit until the stranger finally reached his destination—he turned into a car park where there must have been a hundred cars.

To his left was an impressive multi-storey round building made of glass and metal. It was the Los Angeles Oceanarium and Dolphinarium. Pete had heard of it, but had never visited it. It was a large wildlife park for aquatic creatures that was especially popular with children, and the show with trained dolphins was widely known. Sometimes the whole area was covered with advertising posters for it.

So that guy was likely with the oceanarium. That was fitting. Pete thought of the transport container with the precious ornamental fish.

The van rolled slowly past a group of about twenty people, passed the circular building and headed for a smaller building, in front of which only a few vehicles were parked but no one was around.

Pete stayed behind and stopped at the edge of the visitors' car park. When he got out, he looked more closely at the group of people outside the oceanarium. It was obviously a demonstration. Two women carried a two-metre wide banner that read in huge letters:

DOLPHINS BELONG IN THE OCEAN!

A lean man with a puffy full beard and a white floppy cap rushed up to him and handed him a flyer. "It is unnatural and torture for the dolphins to be in captivity," he said.

Pete took the handout but interrupted the man: "Sorry, no time." He couldn't miss where exactly the tattooed man was going.

"If you say so!" the gaunt man called after him. "—But there must always be time for animal welfare!"

Pete did not engage in any discussion, but strolled towards a smaller building. He spotted a sign that made it clear what it was—a marine research centre which was part of the oceanarium.

The tattooed man stood at the entrance, where he keyed a code into a keypad next to the door. He was then able to enter. Apparently he worked here. Very good, because this way there was a chance of finding him later. However, it was bad that Pete could not follow him at the moment, but he might be able to find out more at the oceanarium.

The Second Investigator walked to the main entrance of the oceanarium, but unfortunately, he was too late—the last admission was fifteen minutes ago. There were still a lot of people in the building, but it would close in less than an hour.

Pete headed for the ticket counter. "Please, I just want to quickly—"

The woman at the counter, who was packing her things, interrupted him. "No exceptions, I'm sorry," she said in such an unfriendly tone that categorically ruled out any regrets. "Besides, you could hardly see anything in that short time anyway. Would be a waste of money."

Pete looked at her name tag. "Sarah, listen, I just want to—"

"The register is already closed," she said. "Come back tomorrow."

Pete briefly considered asking specifically about the tattooed man, but he didn't want to arouse suspicion. The woman probably wouldn't have answered him anyway. With a muttered "okay", he left the ticket counter.

Outside, the gaunt guy with the full beard and the floppy cap immediately approached Pete again and held a flyer out to him. "Dolphins belong in the ocean," he shouted, only to continue a little more quietly: "It's torture for the animals that... oh."

Pete grinned. "Yes, we've met earlier."

"Yes, now I that I recalled," said Mr Full Beard, "you weren't exactly very open-minded."

"I was in a rush just now."

"For animal welfare, there must—"

"—Always be time, yes. I've heard that already."

"You're quite a clever little fellow, aren't you?" The man grinned and suddenly he seemed quite likeable. "I'm David Hill, leader of this little demonstration here. That means I take care of the organizational stuff."

"If you're fighting for the dolphins here, you must know this place quite well. Over there, I saw that there's a marine research centre or something like that." Pete deliberately acted a little naïve. "Surely these people also take care of the animals, feed them, and things like that?"

"That's what they claim!" David Hill sighed. "Some of the so-called scientists are not so bad, but in the end it's all about money. They justify the captivity of the dolphins by inventing reasons that sound good. Anyway... the fact that they train the animals is unnatural!"

"Do you know the people at that research centre?"

"Some."

Should Pete dare? "When I was behind the oceanarium just now, for example, a pretty cool-looking guy walked in, with dragon tattoos and short leather pants."

The animal rights activist raised his shoulders. "Doesn't tell me anything. I don't know that much about who is doing what there. I'm concerned about the dolphins. If you have questions about that or want to stand up for their rights, you can join us."

"Maybe," Pete said vaguely.

"Here's my card." David Hill held out a business card to him.

"Gladly," Pete said, took the card and read it:

Advocate for the Dolphins

David Hill

"I fight for every animal!"

On the back was an e-mail address and mobile phone number.

The Second Investigator thanked him, said goodbye and went back to his MG.

His thoughts wandered to the tattooed man. Was he a scientist at the marine research centre? He could also be a caretaker or some other employee. In any case, he almost certainly had behind-the-scenes access to the oceanarium.

Had he stolen the expensive fish and hidden it in the ruins? But why did he choose such a dangerous and hard-to-reach place? Or was there something else behind it? After all, he had neither brought the transport container there nor taken it with him.

Also what was the Coast Guard looking for on the island? Why was the stranger hiding from the men? And what was it about Bob's tremors that only he had heard and no one else?

4. The Cove

“Someone will come and pick up the container,” Jupiter whispered to Bob when they were back in the large reception hall. “I’m sure of it! The fish can survive in the container for a few hours, maybe a day or two—but I don’t think the animal smugglers will leave the container here unattended for long.”

“Animal smugglers?” asked Bob.

“I admit it’s just a guess, but I think something like that is behind this,” Jupiter said. “It’s something that would even draw the Coast Guard here, because they’re certainly not on the island by chance.”

“How are they involved?”

“The Coast Guard provide maritime security, search and rescue, and law enforcement,” Jupiter began one of his infamous lectures. “They are considered a paramilitary organization, one of the eight uniformed services of the US. Its tasks are diverse, ranging, for example, from maintaining public order at sea to protecting the environment and stopping drug trafficking or even enforcing economic interests in the maritime trade route.”

“—But you were talking about animal smuggling,” Bob wondered sceptically.

The First Investigator nodded. “You are right with your doubt... but we could still consider this possibility until my suspicions are refuted... or do you object?”

Bob didn’t and the two friends decided to observe from a darker area at the back of the lower ground floor. They positioned themselves in a windowless, small room without a door, and this had probably once served as a washroom. The tiles on the wall were partly torn out, and partly cracked. A brackish stench emanated from the open ends of the pipes.

From here, they could see the lower steps of the spiral staircase and the transport container with the fish under the window that led into an inner courtyard.

Bob saw it just like Jupiter—no one would leave such a valuable fish in this bizarre place for long. At the moment, it was completely quiet, and no one had shown up. The wait soon seemed like an eternity to them, to which the stench from the pipes contributed its share.

To make use of the time, Bob went on the Internet with his mobile phone to continue his research on the ruins.

Yesterday, he had read some reports of scandals involving rich people and would-be celebrities who had sought treatment at the sanatorium in its heyday. One had had to shell out a lot of money for therapy treatment at this exclusive place. Reporters from gossip magazines had apparently always been waiting to spot a familiar face among the patients.

Now Bob read an interview that had been conducted in connection with the closure of the sanatorium twenty years ago. He came across the name Mrs Sarah Roskin, who was the director of the sanatorium at the time. She lamented her suffering and told in flowery words that due to the collapse of the grotto and the damage to the building, the sanatorium was deemed unsafe and had to be closed. The grotto had been the location for their popular animal therapies.

“It’s a tragedy for the many therapists employed and all the nursing staff, and it was an economic disaster for me,” Mrs Roskin was quoted as saying. “I personally not only run the

sanatorium, I own the whole property, and now it is almost worthless. Believe me, I'm glad no one was seriously injured or killed in the collapse."

Bob wondered if this Mrs Roskin still owned the place, but who would have bought it from her under these circumstances?

Suddenly, Jupiter tapped him. "I hear something," he whispered. "Someone's coming."

Immediately Bob lowered the mobile phone and switched off the tell-tale light of the display.

Indeed there was someone! However, instead of a person coming down from the spiral staircase, the boys heard the window being pushed open completely. Then a man climbed through the window into the building. He was a small man wearing jeans, a grey shirt and brown hair. That was all they could make out.

Bob took a few photos of the man grabbing the transport container by the handle. However, he did not carry it back to the stairs. Instead, he lifted the container through the window, put it down in the courtyard and then climbed back out! The two investigators had not expected that.

"I'll take a look," Bob whispered. He scurried out of their hiding place, kept to the side of the wall, reached the raised window and peered outside. Weeds were growing everywhere in the courtyard. Sunlight was reflected on a boarded-up glass door that led into the opposite building.

At first Bob thought the stranger was going there, but he headed for a corner of the courtyard where two wings of the sanatorium met and went down a flight of stairs. The last thing Bob saw was the man turning on a flashlight.

"Jupe, let's go after him!" Bob pulled himself up on the window frame and jumped down to the courtyard. The First Investigator followed him and together they hurried off, across the courtyard to the stairwell.

The staircase led down to a basement. Cautiously, Bob took the first steps and listened. It was quiet. Where had the stranger disappeared to?

Bob went further down. It was dark there, only a little light fell into the depths through the open staircase. There was no sign of the man's flashlight beam. Had the stranger noticed them and was now lying in wait for his pursuers?

Bob's heart beat faster at this thought. Slowly his eyes got used to the darkness. At least he could make out where the stairs led. It must have been a small underground car park. The lines of the marked parking spaces on the ground could still be seen. Here and there, unadorned columns supported the ceiling.

Bob switched on his mobile phone to have at least some light from the display. He felt his way to the right.

Suddenly, he sensed a movement! The next moment, something whizzed in the air, flew past Bob's head, touching his hair.

Bob stepped back, involuntarily raised his arms to defend himself, brushing against a slender animal body. It shrieked and fluttered all over. The mobile phone fell out of Bob's hand, and dropped on the ground. In the dim light, silhouettes continued to whiz through the air.

Then there was a touch on his shoulder! Bob swung at it, jumped backwards and bumped into Jupiter, who cursed softly. "Watch out, Bob!"

Both fell to the ground. Bob's hip was hit painfully. Perplexed, the two boys remained down and did not move. The swarm of bats that Bob had startled fluttered over them.

It took an eternity before silence returned. The animals flew elsewhere in the underground car park.

Jupiter got to his feet. "Great, Bob. Keep up the low profile."

Bob fumbled for his mobile phone.

The First Investigator grinned. "We can learn something from this little incident."

"—And what would that be?" asked Bob. "Better to watch out? I couldn't have guessed!" He found his mobile phone and fortunately it seemed to be intact.

"That is not my point. Rather, we can conclude that the man we are pursuing almost certainly went to the left of the stairway, otherwise he would have startled the bats before you did."

So they went back the other way, and passed the entrance and exit for vehicles. This was closed with a rusty gate that had probably not been moved for years or decades. Rain had long washed soil and mud down the ramp. A little further on, there was a second stairway.

"This must be where the guy went up," Jupiter said quietly. He took the first steps.

The staircase was much higher than expected, and when Jupiter reached the first landing, light and surprisingly fresh-smelling air hit him. The higher he climbed, the louder he heard the sea roaring.

Finally they were out in the open—on a rocky plateau with the sanatorium behind them.

Bob looked down the steeply sloping rock face. "We're right above where the fence and the footpath ends below."

On the other side of the small plateau lay the sea. Here too, the cliff fell away steeply. In the depths, the water roared around the cliffs. Wave after wave washed over the jagged rocks with white foaming spray.

"Where could that guy go from here?" asked Jupiter, looking around. Then he saw it. On the side, there was the possibility of going down into a narrow cove. That was the only way the stranger could have taken, and obviously also the only way to reach the isolated cove down there.

Sharp-edged rocks jutting out of the water shielded that place from the open sea. No boat, however small, could find a way in. The waves crashed into the cove and washed over the stones that lay everywhere on the narrow stretch.

Still, Jupiter and Bob did not see the man.

"What is going on here?" Bob sighed. "People are always disappearing."

"He didn't vanish into thin air any more than our tattooed friend did," Jupiter stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "There must be a way out of the cove that we can't see from here... maybe even one into the collapsed grotto under the sanatorium."

"Please! Who voluntarily climbs into a life-threatening grotto?"

"The same one who just grabbed from the ruins of a former luxury sanatorium, a transport container containing a thousand-dollar fish," Jupiter suggested.

The two climbed downwards.

Bob went ahead. "If I imagine lugging a container like that around with me, I'd certainly have quite a bit of trouble with it," he said, "especially since the guy didn't have much time before we showed up here."

"Firstly, he obviously knows his way around and knows the best way to get to the cove... and secondly, our bat encounter has given him a few minutes' head start."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?"

"A good investigator must always strive to discover the obvious—"

"It's okay!"

"You should appreciate my pursuit of logic and truth!"

Jupiter groped for firm footing with his foot, found it and reached out with his hand. Then a large crab scurried away right in front of his fingers. The First Investigator was

startled, slipped and hit his knee. Stones rolled out from under him, clattering downwards—almost all of them past Bob. One, however, hit him directly on his shoulder.

Bob sucked in a hissing breath and rubbed the spot he was hit. “And who should watch out now?”

“How would I know—” Jupe began.

“Okay, okay,” Bob interrupted. “Let’s see if we can get down there. Hopefully the climb will be worth it, and we’ll find something there.”

A little later, they were standing in the cove. The waves were crashing close to them. Bob wondered whether it was high or low tide... but even Jupiter didn’t know.

They looked around, climbed a little, searched for a suspected cave entrance, but there was nothing there.

Where had the man gone to with the transport container? Had he taken another way out of the underground car park?

Unsatisfied, the friends climbed back up to the top of the rock plateau, and back down the stairs. They went to search in the underground car park, but there were only the two stairways in the barren concrete hall. The vehicle entrance and exit were very well secured by the rusty gate, and the man could not possibly have got through there.

The stranger disappeared without a trace.

5. The Dolphin Show

The next day after school, The Three Investigators met at The Jones Salvage Yard, a business run by Jupiter's uncle Titus and his aunt Mathilda. Since the death of Jupiter's parents many years ago, he had been living with his uncle and aunt in the Jones family home situated next to the salvage yard.

When Pete and Bob arrived, Jupiter was having a discussion with his aunt, who wanted to make the boys clean up, as she often did. He put them off until later, and shortly afterwards the boys were on their way to Los Angeles.

The day before, after Pete had spoken briefly with David Hill, he had sneaked back to the marine research centre car park and found that the brown van had left. Then, he had driven back to the island to pick Jupe and Bob up. The First Investigator had then decided that they all return to the marine research centre to stake-out the car park in case the tattooed man returned. However, they had waited until dusk, but the man had not reappeared.

"I did some research," Bob told his friends. "There was definitely no tremors here in the region yesterday—not even a tiny one."

"I told you so," said Jupiter.

"I still had to check," Bob replied.

"—Which begs the question, what did you hear?" said Jupiter.

"Perhaps a cave-in in the grotto," Pete guessed. "It would hardly be documented or noticed by any monitoring agencies."

"Nevertheless, it remains unclear why a part of the grotto should have collapsed again," Jupe thought.

"Maybe our tattooed friend has tampered with something there and that caused the tremors," Pete suggested.

"Even in that case, I should have heard something outside in the garden!" Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Something's fishy, fellas."

"Talking about fish," Bob continued, "I did some checks on the candy basslet. This species is found in the deep waters of tropical parts of the Atlantic Ocean, ranging from the Florida Keys, and along eastern Caribbean, to as far as the northern coast of South America.

"It inhabits caves and sheltered recesses at depths between 15 and 70 metres. Given its reclusive lifestyle and deep-water habitat, they are often difficult to capture in the wild. So in the ornamental fish trade, they do command a hefty price tag.

"For aquarists, the candy basslet is maintained in a salt-water aquarium under subdued illumination, and furnished with lots of live rocks to provide feeding opportunities and shady hiding places."

"Aha!" Jupiter exclaimed. "That could be why our stranger steals a candy basslet and brings it to some natural pond around the island."

"—And perhaps sell it later to aquarists," Pete added.

"I have more information," Bob continued. "This species is not known to breed in the home aquarium. However, it has been bred on a commercial basis, but due to an astonishingly long larval period coupled with a high larval mortality rate, captive bred specimens are a long way from being offered in the trade as yet."

“So our stranger could even be trying to breed it in natural conditions!” Jupiter surmised. “Like I said, fellas, something’s fishy...”

They reached the oceanarium without incident and this time, there was no problem to buy tickets. They only had to queue for a few minutes at the ticket counter.

Inside, they were greeted by a huge aquarium pane behind which a shoal of colourful, iridescent fish were circling. The fish did not let themselves be put off when first a large shadow fell on them and the next moment a stingray floated past them with flapping fins.

Dozens of people crowded in front of the window. The friends walked on, past smaller tanks that housed corals and turtles.

Pete stopped, fascinated, in front of a reddish illuminated disc, behind which jellyfish were drifting through the water with pumping movements, dragging long, thread-like extensions of their bodies. They looked like a flock of dancing animal spirits.

Meanwhile, Jupiter approached a bored-looking young man wearing a green shirt with the oceanarium logo and sitting on a simple chair next to a sign that read: ‘Do you need help? Talk to me!’

“Excuse me.”

“Yes? What can I do for you?”

The First Investigator stretched the truth a little: “I spoke to one of your colleagues the other day and wanted to ask him something else.”

“What’s his name?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know... but he had some tattoos on his arm—Chinese dragons.”

“Ah, Zach Canning. Talked to him after the show, huh?”

“Exactly,” Jupe lied.

“Zach and Nicole are about to perform again. Perhaps you can go see him afterwards. Think Zach’s cool, huh?”

“Quite,” Jupiter agreed. “Thank you for the information.”

The man pointed to the sign next to him. “Hey, that’s what I’m here for. Any other questions? I’ll be happy to answer them for you, unless you want Nicole’s mobile phone number. I’ve been trying to get that for months myself.” He grinned tight-lipped and winked.

Jupiter told his friends what he had found out and together they went to the dolphinarium, where many other people were also on their way.

An auditorium with seats for at least two hundred visitors formed a semi-circle around a huge pool surrounded by transparent glass walls. Several rows of seats were already completely occupied. The investigators found three seats next to each other.

Two dolphins were swimming in the pool. There were some walkways above the water, which gave the trainers plenty of opportunity to move around during the show.

“I remember now,” Bob said. “I was here with my parents, but that was ages ago. I was four or so at the time. All I remember about the show was that everyone in the front rows got splashed wet, and that I thought the dolphins were cool.”

“The dolphins are fed after doing some tricks,” Pete said.

“I guess it’s a bit more than that,” Jupiter said. “I read an article about it. The abilities of the dolphins must be extraordinary.”

Just before the show began, booming loud music played. The children in particular clapped along. Then, when Zach Canning and his colleague Nicole walked across the pool on the footbridge, thunderous applause roared. Both wore wetsuits.

“Dear visitors, welcome to the dolphinarium! I’m Nicole,” the woman said into the microphone of a headset. “My colleague Zach and I will show you in the next half hour how talented dolphins are—especially ours!”

“You’ll be amazed,” Canning added. “There are six dolphins here at the dolphinarium at the moment—the sixth was added just a few days ago. Only two of them will take part in the show. They are the ones we have trained the best!”

He bent over the water where the heads of the dolphins were already sticking out into the open. The animals looked at the two trainers, who took fish out of a bucket and threw to them. The dolphins gobbled them up in one bite. Zach Canning clapped twice and raised his right arm. The dolphins jumped so high that their whole bodies hovered above the water for a moment before splashing back. The audience cheered enthusiastically.

A few more tricks followed, which Zach directed while Nicole ran around the pool and stretched a rope about a metre above the surface of the water. Then she ran along the walkway waving her arms. The two dolphins chased after her in the water before jumping out again—this time over the taut rope, which was met with enthusiastic shouts from the spectators.

“There have been frequent protesters outside our door for some time now,” Zach Canning finally said, “denouncing the fact that we keep dolphins here. I won’t hide this as most of you know anyway. If you feel guilty about attending the show and enjoying the dolphins’ performances, I assure you that you don’t have to! We take great care of the dolphins, and why do they live with us in the first place? Let me tell you a little story...”

“A few weeks ago, a dolphin was injured out at sea. A propeller ripped open the left side of his body—that’s the real danger for these magnificent animals! There are too many boats sailing recklessly along the coast. They stir up the water and create air bubbles. The dolphins like this, so they play and swim along with the boats... and sometimes get injured in the process—just like Percy, our newest arrival. We rescued and saved him. He now lives here in the dolphinarium and we are nursing him back to health. Soon, we will release him back into the ocean. For the welfare of the animals, you need facilities like we have here! At the same time, we can show everyone how valuable and worthwhile it is to protect these animals.”

The next moment, his colleague jumped into the water and submerged herself. Through the glass wall of the pool, The Three Investigators watched with the other spectators as she bent her left leg and extended her right straight back. One of the dolphins swam with its snout to her foot and pushed the trainer forward—slowly first and then at high speed with pinpoint accuracy.

Over the thunderous applause and laughter of the children, Zach Canning continued: “Dolphins are easy to train and we build a relationship with them. They know us and do our bidding. Here, it’s done for show and the animals enjoy it. However, dolphins in the sea can also be abused for completely different purposes, for example, in the military!

“During the Second World War, dolphins were fitted with bombs and trained to approach enemy ships. I don’t need to say more. This is something that animal rights activists can rightly protest against! But we here at the dolphinarium do valuable work protecting the animals, caring for them and studying their behaviour.”

“Sounds all too clearly like an advertisement,” Jupiter commented.

After this brief digression, Zach Canning went back to the demonstration. “But enough of that! Enjoy the rest of the show!” With that, he too jumped into the pool and the second dolphin immediately swam to him. The two trainers and the dolphins formed a circle underwater and spun like a wheel. The performance went on for a few more minutes and the audience was enthusiastic until the end.

When the two trainers said goodbye, the stands emptied quickly.

The Three Investigators had formed a first impression and wanted to sound out Mr Canning regarding what they saw at the sanatorium. To do this, Bob planned to pose as a fan asking for an autograph and then ask a trick question. Jupiter and Pete would keep out of the picture first as it could prove helpful if something went wrong.

So while his friends went to the exit, Bob walked down towards the pool. To his surprise, the trainer came straight towards him—a happy coincidence. Canning was carrying a small bag.

“Mr Canning,” Bob said, getting in his way.

“Sorry, I don’t have time, I—”

“Please, I just have a quick question.”

Canning stopped and looked at Bob. “What’s up, kid? You want an autograph?”

“I have a question, sir. How—”

The dolphin trainer did not let him finish. “Just come with me, I have to go to my office urgently. Let’s talk on the way.” He started walking again, towards the back rows of seats. There Bob spotted a locked door that said: ‘Staff Only’.

The dolphin trainer stepped up to door, pulled a key out of his pocket, unlocked it and gestured to Bob to go in. As soon as Bob was through the door, Canning went in as well, slammed the door unnecessarily hard and locked it.

All of a sudden Bob felt like he was trapped. He had just let himself be separated from Jupiter and Pete! He looked around frantically. There was a corridor with several doors leading off, probably to the staff offices. However, there was no one to be seen, no one who could help him! In a flash, he remembered how Canning had hidden from the Coast Guard...

The dolphin trainer folded his arms. Water dripped from his elbows. “Now, let’s get something straight!”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand what’s upsetting you. I only wanted to ask you one question—”

“Don’t act dumber than you are! You three were asking for me before the show. Do you want to talk or do I have to get physical first?”

Now it was finally clear that Canning had only played the innocent. He had known exactly that Bob was not a harmless autograph hunter and had lured him quite deliberately into a trap!

6. The Pursued Pursuer

“So who are you and what do you want from me?” asked Canning.

“We are excited about the show and wanted to know more about the dolphins,” Bob claimed. He didn’t think it sounded particularly convincing himself because Canning had caught him off guard. Still, he might be able to get out of it.

The dolphin trainer seemed to want to pierce him with glances. “—And that’s why you asked for me specifically in advance, right?”

Bob thought feverishly about how to answer. Behind him, the door was rattled—probably Jupiter and Pete were trying to follow him, but it was locked. Should he call for help?

Canning grabbed him by the arm. “You and I are going to my office now.”

Bob gestured to the door. “My friends know where I am!”

“Oh, so what? Is that supposed to scare me?”

“You can’t force me—”

“What do you think? That I want to make you disappear? Or maybe lock you up right here in the dolphinarium? This isn’t some lonely dungeon in a castle, boy! I just want to know why you’re spying on me!”

“We can tell you that with pleasure—the three of us.”

To his surprise, Canning nodded. “All right, then... but I want to know the truth, understand?”

He unlocked the door. Pete stormed through and was about to pounce on Canning. Jupiter came right after him.

“Wait!” shouted Bob. When he saw his two friends, he immediately felt much safer, although Canning’s behaviour confused him.

“No fairy tales, boys! I know that you—” Canning drilled his index finger on Pete’s chest, “you were following me yesterday!”

So the dolphin trainer went on the offensive and confronted them. It was clear to The Three Investigators that Canning knew much more than they had thought. The three boys exchanged quick glances and understood each other without words.

“All right,” said Pete. “We were in the ruins of the old sanatorium off Long Beach... so were you. We saw you. What were you doing there?”

“And what is it about the transport container that contained a valuable candy basslet?” added Jupe.

Canning’s eyes widened. “Keep it down, boys. No one must hear this.”

“I don’t see anyone here who could overhear us,” Bob said. “Did you steal the fish from here?”

“Please keep it down! And no, I didn’t, of course not! Come with me to my office. We should continue talking in private.”

“We—”

“Come along! It’s dangerous if the wrong people are listening to us.” Zach Canning was obviously full of surprises. “I’m interested in why you came to the ruins at that moment. I think we have a lot to tell each other.” He walked a few more metres and opened a door.

In the small, rather messy room, Canning's partner Nicole sat holding a glass of fruit juice. "Great show today, Zach, wasn't it? Uh... oh... you've got company."

"The boys are fans," Canning said. "They are interested in dolphins and the training. I'll tell them a little bit about it."

"We're doing research for a school project," Bob added—a popular excuse that quickly convinced most people.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm always hungry after the show." With that, she left the room.

Canning pointed to a scuffed little couch. "Have a seat."

Behind the couch were some shelves crammed with books. Next to it was a strange metal frame, a kind of wheelbarrow, only that there was no wheel, and not just two handles, but four, which were folded in to save space.

The dolphin trainer himself took the chair on which his colleague had just been sitting. Jupiter and Bob found a place on the couch, and Pete sat on the side rest.

"Let's start with your legitimate question, sir," Jupiter began. It couldn't hurt to give some innocuous information—maybe then Mr Canning would also come forward with an explanation or two.

"We were taking photos at the ruins for a school project. When we discovered the hole in the fence, we thought we'd find even better views on the site itself."

"Surely you know that it is dangerous there. The building is in danger of collapse!"

"—So says the man we happened to see entering the said building." With this assertion, Jupe deliberately stretched the truth a little.

Canning raised his eyebrows. "You saw—"

"—How you climbed through the window, yes... so we followed you... out of curiosity."

"We followed you downstairs and found the transport container with the valuable fish," Bob added, "but in the process, we lost track of you. Now it's your turn, Mr Canning."

The dolphin trainer was silent. He looked thoughtful. "As far as the fish is concerned... you are completely drawing the wrong conclusions."

"What is it about?" asked Pete.

"You have been following me, and in turn, I have also been following someone."

"You—"

He did not let Pete finish. "My story is very similar to yours. Only it starts here at the oceanarium instead of at school. It looks like all four of us are good guys. I'm sorry I was so harsh with you. I mean... I thought... well, I was afraid you were in cahoots with him and that's why you were following me." The tip of his tongue ran nervously across his lips. He slumped, looking lost all at once, like a heap of misery. "—But that doesn't seem to be the case," he said, relieved as it were.

"Cahoots with whom? Now you're making us curious, sir," Jupiter tried to encourage the man to talk further.

"I have suspected for about a week that one of my colleagues is stealing valuable animals. He acts very cleverly, covers up everything, but once I saw something that I couldn't get out of my head. Two days ago, I wanted to be sure and went after this person after hours."

"Can you tell us his name?" asked Bob.

Zach Canning looked confused for a moment, but then nodded. "His name is Caden Devlin. I tracked him to the ruins, and then inside, downstairs, through the window into the courtyard and into the underground car park... Did you go there as well?"

"Yes, we did," Bob confirmed curtly.

"From there it continues into a cove... but that's where I lost his trail."

This looked very familiar to The Three Investigators.

"Then yesterday, I went to the ruins alone to look for clues," Zach Canning continued. "I suspect Devlin is keeping the stolen animals in the old grotto under the sanatorium. There must be an entrance, though I have no idea where. However, I didn't get anywhere."

"We went the same way you did," Pete said, "except we were following you who were following the real criminal. Crazy!"

"We believe you, sir," Jupiter assured him. "—Because your story fits exactly with what we have experienced but not yet told. Presumably we also saw your colleague, this Caden Devlin—a rather short man with brown hair?"

"I have a snapshot of him," Bob added. He took out his mobile phone and tapped his way into the picture display. "Not very clear, but..." He held the display out to the man.

"That's him, yeah... Caden Devlin, I recognize him. Did you take any more photos?"

"No," Bob replied.

"So what else did you see?"

"The same as you did. He disappeared into the cove."

"So it was! In the old grotto, there was a natural rock pond with underground access to the sea. This allowed water to flow through and it was protected by a grille. The sanatorium used to conduct dolphin therapy for patients in the grotto."

"We already know that, sir," Jupiter said.

"Oh? You guys are pretty smart, huh?"

"Not as smart as we would like to be," Pete said. "You noticed yesterday that I was following you."

Canning flashed a wry grin. "I had a feeling that the same car that had been parked beside my van was following me since leaving the island, so I stopped at the car park and pretended to—"

"Make a phone call!" Pete snapped. "That was just a test to see if I was following you!"

"Exactly... and you pretended very well looking at the notice board, I'll give you that."

Jupiter looked somehow satisfied. "So we tested each other because we were suspicious."

"—But we are obviously on the same page," Canning said.

"—What we could not have guessed, before we cleared up the misunderstandings," Jupiter explained.

"When did you start watching me? Even before I left?" Canning asked. The Second Investigator was about to say something, but the dolphin trainer held out his hand. "No, wait! Did you also see the two men from the Coast Guard come? And that I was hiding from them?"

Now it got interesting. Canning brought up this sensitive subject voluntarily. "I'll tell you why. I felt like a burglar. I had no business in the ruins, and I still have a tendency to keep away from law enforcement officers or policemen. In my youth, I wasn't exactly the gentle, well-behaved type, you know? There were a few fights and I worked as a bouncer in a pub until I came into contact with drugs. I'm not proud of it, but I'm a different person today. Maybe that's why I wanted to expose Devlin, so I could prove it to myself!"

The honesty impressed The Three Investigators.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Jupiter said. "It's good that we have cleared all this up and can now talk openly with each other. There is something you should know about us."

"I'm listening."

"We are investigators." The First Investigator handed the dolphin trainer their business card. It said:



“The Three Investigators, huh?” Zach Canning read in surprise. “So that’s how you know so much. Well, I guess I tried my hand at being an investigator in this case too, although I don’t have as fancy a card as you do.”

“You mentioned the pond in the collapsed grotto...” Bob came back to the case. “—And that Devlin might be keeping the animals there. What do you know about that?”

“The pond provided ideal living conditions for many marine animals and probably still does today. However, it is said that the grotto is no longer accessible.”

“Nevertheless, let’s assume that your suspicions are correct. Then Caden Devlin steals expensive animals here at the oceanarium, stores them in the grotto pond and resells them at some point,” Bob summarized. “A crazy story... but shouldn’t such thefts be noticed?”

“He is very clever. Of course, he can’t steal many animals at once. Exactly how he goes about it, I don’t know.” Canning raised his shoulders. “I don’t have an investigator’s instinct after all.”

“But we do!” said Jupiter. “—And true to our motto ‘We Investigate Anything’, we’re willing to take on this case!”

7. Unconventional Ways

“Although we have identified the perpetrator,” Jupiter continued, “there are still things to be done. We have to expose him, so we have to first find out how he goes about it, and then preferably catch him in the act. Besides, there are other inconsistencies to be clarified.”

“The big rumble yesterday,” Bob said. “Mr Canning, did you hear it too? When I was hiding in the ruins there was a huge rumble. It sounded like another part of the grotto was collapsing. What was that?”

“I have no idea,” Canning replied. “I’m sorry, Bob, I didn’t hear anything like that.”

“And,” Pete added, “is the Coast Guard actually on the case? Or what else were they doing there?”

Canning raised his shoulders. “Maybe the boys were just doing something routine. Did they go towards the ruins?”

“More like towards the nature reserve,” said the Second Investigator. “That’s all I know.”

“First of all, we need more information about Caden Devlin,” Jupe said. “How can he steal animals from the oceanarium without it being noticed? What exactly have you observed in this regard, Mr Canning?”

“That’s not so easy to answer, guys,” Mr Canning said. “There are many little things. I became really suspicious of him when I saw him leave the oceanarium relatively late at night with a transport container. Stupidly, I didn’t confront him then and forgot about the whole thing. About a week later it happened again, just when the oceanarium had bought a large consignment of expensive corals. Quite a few display tanks were newly stocked with beautiful, colourful specimens... Anyway, I tracked him there, to the ruins. You know the rest—I lost track of him. Then the next time I was back there was when you saw me.”

“What exactly is his job here?” asked Bob.

“He is an attendant for valuable species,” Canning explained. “That means he watches the stocks, makes suggestions for new acquisitions, keeps an eye on the offsprings, provides the appropriate food, keeps the accounts for that... things like that.”

“So it’s also possible for him to forge documents,” Bob noted. “He would be the first to notice as soon as a valuable animal was missing. It’s very convenient if he stole it himself!”

“—But he won’t be the only one looking after rare species, right?” Jupiter asked.

The dolphin trainer nodded. “Of course. The oceanarium is far too big, and besides, no one can specialize in all the species we have, as they can have completely different behaviours and requirements. Devlin has a close collaborator who shares the office with him—Adrian Gish, and there are several other people who perform similar tasks.”

“Nevertheless, there is no denying that he sits directly at the source,” Jupiter said.

“Anyway, we need to secure evidence,” Bob said. “Can you get us access to Mr Devlin’s office?”

“No, I don’t have a key,” Zach Canning said.

“Do you know where his office is?” asked Pete.

“Of course.”

“Could you stay with us in the building until late tonight? So until everyone else has gone?”

“That should be the least of your problems. I can always work overtime. However, there are always somebody around here. At night, when there are no visitors, the aisles are cleaned, the aquariums are tended, checks on the water take place...”

“The main thing is that it’s not very busy,” said the Second Investigator. “I’m sure it won’t take me long to open the door to Mr Devlin’s office.” He had no doubt that he would succeed in picking the door lock with his lock picks, as he had earlier noticed that the office doors here did not use high-security locks. It would have been much more difficult to get into the oceanarium from the outside. How fortunate that they had unexpectedly found an ally who worked here in the building.

“You want...” Canning faltered. “So, I mean, you want to break into his office?”

“We’re following a lead!” said Jupiter. “We won’t steal or damage anything.”

“If that’s how investigators work, I can understand why I didn’t get anywhere. I haven’t dared to do something like that yet. Besides, I’ve got a lot to do with the show. I guess it’s a good thing you’re here now. I could really use some support on this one.”

Jupiter nodded. “We have learned that we often have to choose unconventional ways.”

“Still, you shouldn’t get caught. Devlin and his office mate are working today, and they’ll be in the building at least until closing time. What do you hope to find in his office?”

“I can’t say that specifically,” Jupiter replied. “That remains to be seen, but if your colleague is guilty, there must be traces of his thefts which he will try to cover up, for example, falsified documents, manipulated accounts, whatever. With that, we can then prove his deeds.”

“There is a general password for the computers here,” Canning explained. “I’ll give you that. However, everyone is of course free to secure their device separately.”

Jupiter thanked him. “This will help us when we search his office. Also, we will track Mr Devlin and set a trap for him, which, admittedly, we still have to think up. Is there somewhere the three of us can talk undisturbed?”

“You can stay here in my office. I have to go to the dolphins anyway—besides, I have a job to do. If anyone notices and questions you, I can always be reached on my mobile.”

He gave them the number and they arranged to meet again in about an hour, shortly after the oceanarium officially closed.

So The Three Investigators used Zach Canning’s office as a meeting place and discussed their further course of action.

The investigation of Devlin’s office was a certainty. After that, however, they would set a trap for the suspected criminal. It would be difficult for them to catch him in the act at the oceanarium.

In the grotto under the sanatorium—if it was a crime scene—things looked different. They had to ask Canning if Devlin was working the following day. If so, they would look more closely for the suspected entrance to the grotto. Depending on what it looked like on the spot and what hiding places presented themselves, they would lie in wait to take photos for evidence.

Zach Canning had his office in the dolphinarium and thus quite far from the office of Caden Devlin and Adrian Gish. The dolphin trainer led The Three Investigators there through several narrow corridors and up unadorned stairs after the official closing. Close to their destination was a small lounge with two tables, a few chairs and a snack vending machine. From there, a window front offered a breathtaking view of the top of the oceanarium’s huge central pool.

Zach Canning said goodbye, but would still be in the building and could be contacted by mobile phone at any time when the boys needed him.

The Three Investigators pulled crisps and cookies from the vending machine and pounced on them with ravenous appetite. They hadn't eaten for ages. Then they sat down so that they could keep an eye on Devlin's office door. There was light shining from under it—obviously he was still working.

They didn't have to wait too long before the door opened. However, it was not the suspect himself who came out, but a grey-haired man wearing an equally grey shirt. That had to be Adrian Gish, Devlin's colleague.

Gish came into the lounge, stopped in front of the vending machine, threw in a few coins and pulled out a chocolate bar. He unwrapped it, flicked the paper into the bin... and stumbled when he saw The Three Investigators.

"How did you guys get here? This area is not for visitors... besides, we're closed." He took a bite and added, chewing, "—Or are you doing an internship? In that case..." What he said next was hard to understand as he was mumbling as he chewed.

"We're friends of Zach Canning," Jupiter explained. "He's picking us up here later."

"Oh, that's all right then. Have a good evening." The man waved casually and walked down the corridor towards the stairwell.

They had to wait another ten minutes or so until Devlin also came out of the office and locked the door. He hurried past the three boys without seemingly noticing them.

As planned, Bob remained unobtrusively on Devlin's heels. The suspected animal thief went out a back exit and left the oceanarium. Bob waited briefly, but Devlin did not return, so he sent a message to Pete's mobile phone:

The coast is clear.

While Jupiter kept an eye on the corridor and would warn Pete immediately if anyone appeared, the Second Investigator went into action.

Outside Devlin's office door, he pulled out his lock picks and went to work. It took three attempts and a little dexterity before the door swung open with an auspicious click. Pete then waved Jupe over.

The First Investigator scurried into the room and closed the door behind him. His two friends remained on watch and would warn him with a message if danger was imminent.

8. Searching for Evidences

The room had only one small window with a blue curtain drawn in front of it.

Jupiter switched on a small lamp on the desk where Devlin and his colleague were apparently sitting opposite each other at work. They were using two computers, with papers stacked next to them. Which workstation belonged to their suspect? The First Investigator stood behind one of the chairs and looked around. In the bin on that side were several chocolate bar wrappers.

Jupiter went to the other side of the table and booted up the computer. It was not exactly the latest model and it would take some time before the start-up screen appeared.

Jupiter used this time to look at the pile of documents that were lying on top of each other in a rather disorganized way—mostly advertising mail, an offer for a large delivery of fish food. On the top drawer of the desk was a sticky note that read ‘Call AR’ in neat handwriting. None of it seemed interesting in any way, though the First Investigator made it a point to remember the initials ‘AR’. It might come in handy later.

A prompt to enter the password popped up on the screen. Thanks to Zach Canning, Jupiter knew the general password of the oceanarium, and that got him through. Devlin had not secured his computer any further, otherwise the First Investigator would not have been able to look around on the hard drive. However, this lack of security could also reduce the likelihood of uncovering any evidence that Devlin would have wanted to hide.

There were only a few files on the desktop. One was labelled ‘NEW ADVERTISEMENTS’ in capital letters. Jupiter clicked on it. A list with marine animals and dates appeared. The records showed that the oceanarium had acquired a total of eight candy basslet specimens a week ago for the handsome sum of \$9,000. This caught his eye because they had just come across such a fish. Of course that proved nothing as long as there was no contradiction with other records. What if there had actually been nine of these fish?

The list of new acquisitions covered three pages and went back only a month. So that they could access it later, Jupiter used his mobile phone to photograph the pages individually from the screen.

A folder in the upper left corner was titled ‘Completed Cases’. There were four files in it. One immediately caught Jupiter’s attention—it read: ‘Dead’. The First Investigator opened this document and found a list of deceased animals. The latest entry electrified him. It was dated the day before yesterday: ‘Candy Basslet #1’.

That fitted like a glove and Jupiter immediately saw what had happened. A week ago, Devlin had bought eight of such fish for the oceanarium, and two days ago, one of them had supposedly died. In reality, it could have been stolen.

The list of dead animals was only half a page long. Jupiter took another photo. Perhaps a closer look would reveal other abnormalities.

The First Investigator had not expected to find what he was looking for so quickly—even if it did not yet pass for solid evidence. He fumbled for the mobile phone in his pocket, thinking it was vibrating because his friends were sending him a warning, but he was probably wrong.

Jupiter clicked through some other folders but found nothing suspicious. Then he opened the only drawer on the desk. Inside was only a thin folder. The inscription ‘Completed Cases’ looked familiar to him. He took it out and opened it. There was only one page. It documented the death of ‘Candy Basslet #1’ in a single line of text and was signed by both Caden Devlin and Adrian Gish.

Did that mean that Gish was involved in the animal thefts? Or had he merely signed the document without investigating. Perhaps this kind of thing happened frequently and he didn’t take it too seriously.

Jupiter’s camera went into action again.

At the same moment, his mobile phone vibrated very clearly. The message was from Pete and it read:

Out!

Without hesitation, Jupiter shut down the computer. He hurried to the door, wanted to open it... but then he faltered. He heard voices just outside the door—first Pete’s, then a little further away that of a man unknown to him.

Jupiter could no longer leave!

Pete peeked around the corner at the end of the corridor and saw a guard passing by on his rounds. Immediately he sent a message to Jupiter. The guard was coming his way!

Pete looked back over his shoulder. What was taking Jupiter so long? There were only seconds left before the guard reached him and could catch the First Investigator coming out of Devlin’s office. Pete went back to the door. He heard footsteps in the room. Perhaps Jupiter had come to the door, but the guard was now right at the corner. This could not go well.

“H-hello, sir,” Pete called out, annoyed at his stutter.

“Evening,” said the man, approaching the Second Investigator with wide strides. He was a giant of a man and had the muscles of a champion body builder. “What are you doing here at this hour?”

‘Oh please, Juve, realize that we are standing here in front of the door and stay inside!’ Pete prayed inwardly and then said: “I’m waiting for Zach Canning. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Zach? What are you talking about? He’s not usually here at this time... besides, his office is somewhere else entirely.” The guard sounded suspicious, not entirely without reason.

“He asked me to wait here.”

“Why is that?”

“Uh...” Geez, Pete, get a grip! “I came here for a candy bar, and Zach went to his office to do something else.”

The guard’s hand rested on his baton. Apparently, his distrust was growing rather than the Second Investigator being able to reduce it. “Well, why don’t you give him a call? He’ll back up your story for sure, won’t he?”

“Sure,” Pete hurried to say. He pulled out his mobile and tapped Zach Canning’s number. “Busy.”

“Oh, what a coincidence,” the guard said. “Shall I tell you what I think? You’re making a fool of me! Why don’t you step aside?”

“Why?” Pete’s feet seemed stuck outside Caden Devlin’s office door.

“Move aside! You want to distract me—and from that office door!” He glanced at the name plate. “Caden and Adrian... hmm...”

“But no, I—” Pete fell silent as the man grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him aside.

The guard took out a key—probably a master key for all offices—and unlocked it. Pete’s heart slipped into his pants. Jupe would be caught and...

The guard looked into the room and flicked on the light. “Nothing,” he muttered. He almost sounded a little disappointed. “Still, you’ll have to explain to me what you are doing here!”

Pete was immensely relieved that Jupiter had obviously smelt a rat and gone into hiding, but that could not last for long. If the guard took a closer look around the room, he would find the First Investigator.

Pete desperately searched for a good explanation—and could hardly believe his eyes. Bob came strolling around the corner, and with him was Zach Canning! “Look, I already said that,” he said casually. “I’m waiting for Mr Canning... and here he is already!”

The guard turned around. “Oh.”

“Is something wrong, Dan?” asked Canning.

“I saw the fellow loitering here and thought...” The guard waved it off. “Oh, no hard feelings, eh?”

“All right,” Pete assured him. “You were just doing your job. I would have suspected me too.” He laughed.

The guard pulled the door shut and locked it back. “Well, I’ll be on my way.” With that, he walked off.

Pete dropped onto one of the chairs by the vending machine. “That was close,” he muttered.

“Jupe heard you and messaged to me,” Bob explained. “I then immediately phoned Mr Canning and we came here right away.”

So that’s why Zach’s phone was busy.

Bob knocked quickly on the office door and called out: “The coast is clear.”

Seconds later, Jupiter came out and beamed at his friends. “Let’s get out of here! I’ve found what I’m looking for.”

9. Setting Up a Trap

After school the following day, The Three Investigators were in Pete's car heading towards Long Beach, the destination being the ruins of the sanatorium, or more precisely the cove next to it, where they hoped to find the entrance to the grotto.

"What do you think?" asked Pete. "The lists you photographed suggest that Devlin had taken this 'candy cane' fish out from the—"

"Candy basslet," Jupiter corrected.

Pete grinned. "—That he has taken it out of from the records, claiming that it had died. I wonder if he does that often. Has he been stealing rare animals in this way for years?"

"It's possible," said the First Investigator, "though certainly not bigger animals like dolphins. That would immediately attract attention, not to mention that he could hardly smuggle them out of the building. In any case, there are enough valuable species among the small fish. For the fish that Devlin had stolen, obviously he must have found appropriate living conditions for it somewhere in the vicinity of the sanatorium."

"I was still researching last night," Bob said, "couldn't sleep anyway... In an old interview with Mrs Roskin, the owner of the sanatorium, the grotto was described in detail. She gave an account of it to an animal rights activist. The grotto pond has an underground connection to the sea so fresh salt water flows into it all the time. For a while at least, octopuses can survive there, provided there is enough light, as can jellyfish and countless species of fish—far more than Devlin could pack into an aquarium in his living room, for example."

"Good to know," Jupiter praised. "After all, Caden Devlin has the best opportunities, as long as he finds ways to manipulate the accounts accordingly. I came across the fraud so quickly that I guarantee it wasn't an isolated case."

Finally they reached the bridge to the offshore island, passed it and parked the car. On the way to the ruins, The Three Investigators carried backpacks containing their investigation equipment so as to prepare them for anything.

"Everything looks the same as last time," Bob commented as they squeezed through the hole in the fence and walked towards the abandoned building. "No new collapses, I hope."

"We will also find out what you heard," Jupiter said confidently.

They climbed through the glassless window opening. In the reception hall, they went down the spiral staircase, through the window there into the courtyard, down into the underground car park and up again to the lookout point over the sea. From there, they climbed down to the cove.

Some rocks that had been washed by water the day before were now exposed. It was clear that the tide was higher than now.

They clambered along the rock wall, keeping their eyes open to see if they could find a hidden way from the cove into some sort of a cave. There was less wind blowing from the sea than on their last visit, so they could move more safely. However, they found no such opening.

As Jupiter sat down on a rock in frustration and looked out to sea, he became aware of something completely different. He looked around. Bob was at the other end of the cove and

was climbing behind some bigger rocks, but Pete was close enough that he could hear him. That's why Jupiter stretched out his arm and called out: "Pete, look at that—a Coast Guard cutter!"

In fact, Pete now also spotted the large Coast Guard logo at the top of the vessel. It sailed past the island towards the mainland.

"As we see this patrol yet again," Jupiter said, "the probability increases that the appearance of the two uniformed men yesterday was no coincidence."

"What do you think they are around here for?"

"I wish I knew."

Bob hurried towards them—as fast as he could on the wet surface. "I found it!" he shouted excitedly.

Jupiter jumped up. "You found an entrance?"

"Exactly that! And I know why we missed it last time. Come on!"

He led them across the cove. At the other end were some man-sized boulders and Bob squeezed through to get behind them. He waded through ankle-deep water.

"Last time the water was higher!" Bob explained. "We would only have come here if, firstly, we had known about this hidden entrance and, secondly, if we had waded through water that was at least knee-deep. The way it is, this opening doesn't get completely covered over at high tide, but you do get quite wet trying to come here!"

The entrance was narrow. Bob pressed on and reached the start of a tunnel. The view was lost in the darkness after a few metres.

When Pete tried to follow him, he slipped off a wet rock and landed with his entire left leg in the water. Slimy green thread algae floated in it. The Second Investigator cursed to himself as he pulled his leg back. The water completely soaked his shoes.

They all carried flashlights in their trouser pockets. Bob pulled out his and shone it into the tunnel. The light illuminated a rock wall, where the tunnel bent to the side.

Canning had said that Devlin was on duty this afternoon, which meant that he was most certainly not in the grotto. However, The Three Investigators still had to be careful in case they ran into Adrian Gish, who might have been Devlin's accomplice. According to Canning, Gish only worked in the morning.

Bob led the way further into the tunnel, shining his light with every step in front of him, while his friends kept their flashlights switched off. Just before the bend, Bob turned off the light and stopped. Together they listened into the darkness.

Nothing.

Bob switched his flashlight on again. The ground was uneven and the walls angular. He shone his light into every corner and alcove. A fat spider scurried away when the beam of light hit it. After about fifteen metres, the ceiling got lower. They ducked their heads.

"This is... not funny anymore," Jupiter groaned as, to make matters worse, a few drops of ice-cold water from the ceiling dropped on the back of his neck.

Suddenly, the tunnel widened into a dimly lit cavern. A little daylight fell from the ceiling through two crevices that were a few centimetres wide. Moss grew in them, and a few one-metre-long but wafer-thin roots dangled down.

"We are in the grotto," Pete said.

"This is actually a cave," Jupiter remarked.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"In principle, the terms 'cave' and 'grotto' are synonymous. However, 'grotto' is used especially for very small cave chambers or those that have been designed by human hands. This is—"

“Cave or grotto, why does it matter?” Bob interrupted. “Look around you! We did it!” At these words, he walked on. The atmosphere thrilled him.

The longer they stayed in here, the better their eyes got used to the dim light. The ceiling was about four to five metres above them. The base of the grotto was perhaps twenty, at most thirty paces across, the walls were jagged and full of niches and indentations. In some places, there were piles of rubble and stones. The pond lay roughly in the middle in a rocky hollow shaped like a circular bowl and it was much smaller than expected. It had a radius of less than five metres.

Bob went to the pond and spotted two, no, three fish quickly swimming away as the beam of his flashlight hit the water. He couldn’t make out exactly what kind of fish they were, but he thought it was possible that they were ornamental fish.

The water was slightly turbid, such that the depth could not be estimated exactly. A semi-circular opening in the rock just above the water surface apparently served as a natural outlet and inlet. Water from the sea probably gurgled through it at high tide and retreated again at low tide. A close-meshed wire net prevented anything other than water from getting through.

“Just as expected,” Bob said proudly. “Devlin’s secret stash!”

“Hold on a minute!” Pete said. “How could the dolphin therapy have taken place in this puddle?”

“This is definitely not all,” Jupiter said. “Over there is probably where part of the grotto collapsed.” He pointed to where a mountain of stones was piled up to the ceiling. “Beyond that collapse, could be another part of the grotto. Probably that’s where the actual grotto pond was. That’s probably why you wouldn’t find a dolphin here...”

“Both of you are right,” Bob said. “What we see now can’t possibly have been the therapy area for the patients—it’s collapsed and inaccessible, but this pond is obviously enough for Devlin. It’s an almost perfectly hidden place where he stores the stolen fish.”

“So let’s go,” Pete urged. “Let’s set the trap!”

They looked for hiding places so that from good cover, they could observe unnoticed anyone who came into the grotto, ideally in such a way that they could also take photos and video recordings. Their investigation equipment included a night-vision camera—not exactly the latest model, but it would serve its purpose.

Pete and Bob looked around while Jupiter took up position in the tunnel to keep an eye on any newcomers and immediately warn his friends.

At the edge of the collapse lay some larger rocks, behind which the Second Investigator took cover as a test. “Not a bad spot,” he said to Bob. “I think this is where I’ll stay. It’s not particularly comfortable, but—”

Suddenly, Jupiter came rushing back into the grotto. “Quiet!” he hissed.

“What?”

“Lights out, hide! Devlin’s coming!”

10. Caught!

“Over here,” Pete whispered, signalling Jupiter to hide behind the rock he had just discovered at the edge of the collapse.

He himself wanted to press into a deep alcove to the left of the tunnel entrance that he had seen earlier. He hurried off, but that was when he saw Bob already disappearing into that very alcove. There was not enough room for them both. For a second, the Second Investigator stood rooted to the spot. Then he darted to the side, the main thing was to get as far as possible from Bob.

There was no other good hiding place. Pete moved as far away as possible from the pond, where he assumed Devlin’s target was, crouched down by the grotto wall and lowered his head.

Caden Devlin came out of the tunnel with a transport container in one hand and a flashlight in the other. How could he come now? This didn’t fit in with his working hours... unless he had finished work early.

As expected, he walked towards the pond, and did so calmly. He had obviously not noticed the intruders.

Pete’s heart was beating up to his neck.

Devlin put the flashlight on the ground, set the container down and opened it. “So, my dear prickly fellow,” he said to whatever was inside, “this is your new home.”

He chuckled, lifted the container over the edge, bent low and tipped the contents into the small pond. The splash echoed off the grotto walls. Then he stood up, stretched and let his hands disappear into his trouser pockets. He walked a few steps and came closer to Pete.

The Second Investigator did not dare to breathe. Devlin was bound to see him at any moment!

Pete realized his mistake a moment too late—he had long since been discovered because suddenly Devlin jumped forward, jerked his hands out of his pockets. There was a click—and a second after that, the Second Investigator felt the blade of an unfolded pocket knife at his neck.

“Who are you, boy, and why are you here?”

“I... I—”

“I’ve seen you before. Yesterday at the oceanarium in front of my office. Now don’t tell me fairy tales! Who—are—you?”

“Put... the knife away.” Pete groaned, but now it was a case of keeping his nerve. If Devlin had seen him the day before, he must have also seen Jupiter and Bob—but either he didn’t remember that Pete hadn’t been alone, or it didn’t occur to him that Pete’s two friends might be here too. The Second Investigator had to take advantage of this.

“Answer my question!” Devlin growled.

“I saw you steal a fish.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not lying,” Pete lied.

“You couldn’t have seen it.” Devlin cursed. “Who knows you’re here?”

“No one.”

“Ha! That came way too fast. You’re not that stupid! Again, who knows? Wasn’t there someone else with you yesterday outside my office?”

Pete’s carotid artery throbbed so hard it hurt. Should he claim that he had informed the police? Nonsense, why should he have come here himself then?

“Yes... me,” Jupiter called out. He rose from his hiding place and came closer with his arms outstretched. “I know! Don’t hurt my friend. We both followed you here the day before yesterday and now we wanted to check this place out. This cave is great. We couldn’t care less what you’re doing here.”

Pete understood what Jupiter was up to. The First Investigator drew everyone’s attention so that Bob could act unnoticed.

“You rascals! What am I going to do with you now?” Devlin’s gaze wandered back and forth between the two boys. The grip with which he clutched Pete was no longer as firm as before. No doubt the man was rattled. His fingers were trembling and he couldn’t get it under control.

“Listen, we—” the Second Investigator jumped into Jupiter’s plan.

“Shut up! And that goes for you too, fatso!”

Jupiter obeyed.

Suddenly there was a thunderous noise—a huge rumble as if something was collapsing! It came from the tunnel that led here from the cove. Pete’s heart sank into his pants. They would be buried or locked in the grotto forever!

Devlin gasped, jerking his head up. “Not again!”

Sensing the chance, Jupiter jumped towards the man, grabbed the arm with the knife and bent it to the side.

Pete immediately bent down out of his opponent’s reach, came back up and grabbed Devlin’s other arm.

The man cried out.

Jupiter arched his arm further behind his back. “Drop the knife!”

The knife clanked to the ground. The next moment Pete howled. Devlin had kicked him in the knee. Now he shook off Jupiter too and rushed off, but Pete immediately followed up. Their opponent dodged, stumbled and fell. He hit his head on the rock face, groaned and slumped. He lay motionless with a bleeding wound on his temple.

The Second Investigator was with him the next moment and realized that Devlin was unconscious. However, his pulse was regular and strong. Pete turned him on his side so that he could continue breathing steadily.

When the Second Investigator had finished his first aid, he looked at Jupiter and asked: “What about the noise?”

The grotto seemed stable, but the idea of being locked up down here took his breath away. That was when he heard Bob laughing.

“That was me.”

“You?” Pete looked at his friend with wide eyes.

“I was able to sneak into the tunnel and tip over one of the bigger rocks there. It thundered against the wall and rolled a bit further. It reverberated quite a bit. Worked well, didn’t it? I thought about how the cave-in noise scared me so much the other day, and I was sure Devlin would feel the same way.” Bob pointed to his friends. “You guys too, I’m afraid. Sorry. I couldn’t warn you.”

“An excellent idea, Bob,” said Jupiter. “Quite surprising and effective at the same time.”

“So you’re surprised I had a good idea?” asked Bob.

“I didn’t say that,” Jupiter stated.

Bob grinned. "You watch Devlin, I'll go outside. There should be reception in the cove. I'll call the police..." He looked to the unconscious man. "—And an ambulance."

11. The Case is Not Over

In Pete's backpack was a short rope, part of the equipment for the climbing. However, now he used the rope to tie the hands of the unconscious Caden Devlin.

While waiting for Bob to return, the two investigators wondered what would happen next. The perpetrator was clearly exposed and caught, so the police would take care of everything else. The people in charge at the oceanarium would find out about the matter so that there could no longer be any unnoticed thefts thanks to manipulated records—and the grotto was no longer an option as a storage facility for stolen animals.

It was undoubtedly a success for The Three Investigators, however, the First Investigator did not look really satisfied. He pinched his lower lip.

"What's wrong?" asked Pete.

"I'm thinking about Bob's trick with the rock."

"Cool idea."

"That's true, but that's not my point."

"What then?"

Before Jupiter could answer, Caden Devlin groaned. Then his eyelids lifted, fluttering.

"Stay calm," Jupiter told him. "You are not seriously injured."

"—And don't get any ideas," Pete added. "We've tied your hands and are keeping a close eye on you. By the way, there was no cave-in earlier, our friend tricked you."

"You are..." the thief started, tried to sit up, contorted his face painfully and lost consciousness again.

"Apparently he's got it pretty bad after all," commented the Second Investigator. "Hopefully Bob will return soon with the paramedics and the policemen."

"Can't be long now," Jupiter guessed, and indeed Bob returned shortly afterwards, with two policemen and two paramedics in tow. All four were wearing helmets, and one of the two policemen had brought more for the boys and Devlin.

The first paramedic was called Elly Baring according to her name tag. She immediately crouched down next to the unconscious man and examined him. As she cleaned and bandaged the small wound on his temple, Caden Devlin awoke again and looked in amazement at the many people around him.

"You are under provisional arrest on suspicion of multiple thefts," one of the policemen, a thin man called Inspector Zeran, explained, rattling off the legal briefing.

Devlin cursed angrily.

Inspector Zeran turned to The Three Investigators. "You boys are going to have to put a bit more on record. Your friend here," he pointed at Bob, "has already told us how you tracked down the criminal to this place, but there are still some questions unanswered."

"You three did a great job," the second policeman added. "A clean success... and our colleague Cotta from Rocky Beach confirmed that you guys often work with him."

"I advised them to call Cotta," Bob told his friends, "because at first they thought I was going to—"

"—Pull our leg, yes," Zeran interrupted. "Sounded like it when you told us about an unconscious animal thief in a hidden cave under the sanatorium ruins. You wouldn't believe

how many jokers call us and tell us crazy stories they've made up from time to time."

Meanwhile, Elly Baring confirmed that Devlin could be led out from this inhospitable place.

Inspector Zeran then advised The Three Investigators to make their way out of the grotto and leave, while the police and the paramedics would take a longer time to get Devlin out of there.

"Get back to us later," the inspector told the boys. "Until then, thanks for your help."

Just then, Caden Devlin spat and hissed to The Three Investigators: "Hopefully, the next earthquake will trap you rascals in here!" He faltered. "—Or was it that you guys created this?"

"Created this?" the First Investigator wondered. "What do you mean by that? Since when have such tremors been created?"

Devlin stared at Jupiter and remained silent.

A short while later, the three of them were back in the car park and got into Pete's car. The Second Investigator promptly drove off.

"From the sound of it, Devlin has experienced several of these so-called tremors," Jupiter said thoughtfully. "What's it all about?"

Pete waved it off. "No idea... and it doesn't matter anymore. Devlin's business here is over. The case is over."

"Not really. Bob felt a tremor that doesn't seem to be real, and Devlin has apparently experienced it several times before. Remember? Just before we overpowered him, he shouted: 'Not again!' ... and the Coast Guard patrols the area suspiciously often. There are more secrets here, fellas!"

"What do you mean?" asked Pete.

"Bob's trick earlier made me wonder," Jupiter said. "The noise thundered off to distract Devlin. Maybe that's exactly what happened before."

"Hold on! The rumble I made in the tunnel was loud," Bob recalled, "but it was not as loud as the one I heard when I was in the building."

"Hmm... what if someone has another way to simulate the noise of a collapse?" Jupe wondered, "—Not to distract anyone, but to scare them... especially to scare the one who usually hangs around here in the grotto—Devlin! It is likely that Devlin is standing in someone's way—a still unknown person who doesn't want him in the grotto."

"Someone who is a thorn in Devlin's side," Bob continued to ponder. "—But why go to such lengths? Why doesn't this someone just call the police?"

"Well, that's obvious," said Pete, "because the person probably doesn't want to have anything to do with the police!"

Jupiter nodded. "—Or with the Coast Guard," he added thoughtfully. "Fellas, my instinct tells me that whatever is going on here, we have only just scratched the surface of the mystery!"

In the evening, the boys met at Headquarters—their office which was located in an old mobile home trailer on the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard. The trailer was hidden under a mountain of scrap metal. Over time, The Three Investigators had stocked the trailer with almost everything they needed for their investigations—computer and communication systems and gadgets, comfortable armchairs, refrigerator and even a small laboratory.

“Regarding this case, yes, I can’t file my report yet,” Bob said as he chewed a delicious white chocolate covered biscuit.

“By the way, what were you going to name this case?” Pete asked. “*The Mystery of the Candy Cane Fish?*”

“It’s the candy bass—” Jupe corrected.

“Yeah, yeah,” Pete grumbled.

“In any case...” Jupiter quickly continued before Pete could say anything else. “—This case is not only about a missing fish. There is more to it...”

“What are you thinking?” Bob asked.

“First, we’ll go to the oceanarium again,” Jupe suggested, “and take a closer look at Devlin’s office partner, Adrian Gish. He confirmed the death of the candy basslet, and in other cases it probably went quite similarly. Very likely he’s involved.”

“We’ve had enough excitement for today,” Pete said. “Any more would be—” He fell silent as the phone rang at that moment of all times. “You’ve got to be kidding,” he then added.

Bob switched on the loudspeaker and answered the call: “The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking.”

“Yes, good afternoon.” The woman’s voice was unfamiliar to the three boys. It sounded like an elderly, distinguished lady, though such a first impression could easily be deceiving. “The police have informed me that you have apprehended a criminal on my abandoned property. I would like to express my gratitude to you for that.”

“That’s nice, Mrs Roskin. You are Mrs Sarah Roskin, right?”

“Yes, that’s me. Quite amazing, I hadn’t mentioned my name yet.”

“We were on the site because of a school project, so we looked into the history a bit beforehand. I wasn’t completely sure whether you still own the property today. We know from interviews with you at the time that you had to close the sanatorium.”

“Quite amazing,” the woman repeated. “You are actually good investigators. My property may be worthless by now. In any case, I would like to invite you to my place as thanks for stopping my property from being used as a trans-shipment point for stolen animals. How about tomorrow? I’ll give you the address of my office.”

“Are you still in the same line of business?” asked Bob.

“I have a small private clinic now. I am a psychotherapist, but I don’t see many patients anymore. Three or four therapy sessions a day are enough for me... and don’t worry, you don’t have to lie down on the treatment couch.”

“I’ll be happy to come,” Bob assured her. “I don’t know if my friends can accompany me, though.” He was given the address and they arranged to meet at three o’clock the next afternoon. Bob then hung up.

“It’s good that you made it clear right away that we can’t all go,” Jupe said. “We have to split up as there are still a lot to do.”

Bob nodded. “You two take care of the oceanarium and Adrian Gish. In the meantime, maybe I can get more information from Mrs Roskin—after all, she owns the place. She knows the ruins and the grotto like no one else. I’ll cautiously ask her if there have been any other strange happenings there recently. Maybe I’ll get on the trail of these pseudo-earthquakes.”

“—And find out if she knows anything about the Coast Guard patrols,” Jupiter added.

12. A Conversation with Mrs Roskin

Twenty years ago, as head of the private sanatorium, Sarah Roskin had been a well-known personality throughout Southern California. Her current private clinic, as small as it was exquisite, enjoyed a good reputation. The patients then and now had something in common—they were rich. One had to be rich to be able to afford a session with Mrs Roskin.

However, her reputation had not always been so good, as Bob had found out during a detailed research. Whether and how he would use this information in the upcoming conversation, he did not know yet. He would improvise, depending on how the meeting went.

Bob left straight after school. The clinic was in Mrs Roskin's private home, a fancy mansion on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Bob parked his yellow Beetle nearby. He spotted two intercom buttons at the gate—one said 'Roskin Clinic', the other 'Private'.

Bob pushed the button for the clinic. The intercom beeped three times before a woman's voice rang out that clearly did not belong to Mrs Roskin. "Yes?"

"My name is Bob Andrews, I have an appointment with Mrs Roskin."

"Oh, one of those young investigators. Come in when the gate opens."

The gate hummed, Bob pushed it open and walked through the front garden. At the house, the front door was lined on the right and left by two wooden dolphins in a leaping position.

A young woman opened the door and peered at him over her glasses that had slid down. She was probably the receptionist.

At that moment, Mrs Roskin appeared. She smiled, which added to the numerous wrinkles on her face. Her grey hair was braided into a pigtail that hung forward over her left shoulder. "So you're Bob Andrews! Too bad your friends couldn't accompany you."

"They told me to give you their best regards. It was as much a pleasure for them as it was for me to put an end to the animal thefts."

Mrs Roskin led Bob into an empty waiting room. "Would you like some tea? We have all sorts—black, green, white?"

"White?" thought Bob. "No thanks."

Mrs Roskin sat down opposite Bob. "So how did you and your friends get involved in this?" she asked. "You told me on the phone that it was about a school project, right?"

"Yes," Bob said and then briefly told Mrs Roskin about how they got into the sanatorium and saw the transport container there with the ornamental fish. Then they traced Devlin to the cove but then nothing came out of it. To cut short on the details, he did not mention their visit to the oceanarium. Two days later, they returned to the ruins and found the way from the cove, through the tunnel, to get to the grotto.

"It was shocking what had happened on my property!" Mrs Roskin shook her head. "To think if this had gone on and I might even have been questioned at some point!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the grotto is still my property. Couldn't I be held liable if someone commits crimes there?" She waved it off. "I'm not familiar with that kind of criminal activity. That's more your thing, I suppose."

"Uh..."

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that! I meant to say as an investigator, you’ll understand more about these things.”

Bob spontaneously decided to take the opportunity to grill her a little using his new findings. “It’s very possible that when there are any incidents involving the grotto, and therefore its connection to you, Mrs Roskin, I’m sure the media would have jumped on it right away. Perhaps they might even dig up the old allegations against you.”

She lowered her head and put her hand to her forehead. “Hmm... how do you know about it anyway? Something like that can never be cleared up, even though it was clearly proven that I was innocent!”

“Actually, I was looking for completely different information, but I saw the recording of an old TV interview. You were very relieved then that the drug trafficking investigation had been dropped.”

“Imagine, they had actually suspected me!” She laughed as if that were something completely unimaginable.

“Actually, who had made the suspicion?” Bob asked. “The police?”

“No, it was some hack of a reporter who resorted to dubious unnamed sources! He called me the drug queen who resides in her private sanatorium. Of course, he had no proof. In fact, where would it even come from? He just made it all up!”

“But something must have happened,” Bob said.

“One of my patients had been selling drugs while he was staying at the sanatorium for therapy. He was a completely broken movie star, and I talked him out of suicidal thoughts. In fact, I even made sure that he didn’t go to prison but to a rehab clinic. I guess it wasn’t sensational enough for that sleazebag from the paper, so he made up something about a drug empire.”

Bob noticed how vehemently she defended herself after all this time. It must have hit her hard at the time. “All the charges have been dropped, right?”

“Of course! But it still damaged my reputation. I had just recovered from it and the sanatorium was doing splendidly again when then the earthquake hit.” She shook her head under the weight of memories.

So now they came to the point of Bob’s burning interest—the tremors! According to his research, it seemed to have been a one-time event, because there had officially been no more tremors in the area of the island since then. This was quite contrary to what he himself had experienced and what Caden Devlin had said. “So after that you had to close the sanatorium. Would you be able to tell me what happened in the collapse back then?”

“It was a disaster! Luckily I wasn’t in the building, but several guests and two nurses from the night shift were. An earth tremor brought the grotto down—or rather most of it. Huge boulders thundered into the therapy area. Everything became inaccessible. The whole facility shattered! The staircase leading down from the sanatorium also collapsed. If this had happened during the day, there could have been fatalities.” She sighed. “Fortunately, there was no one in the grotto then... and also, the poor animals survived.”

“How so?” asked Bob.

“The next day, when it was all over, a diver from the outside was able to swim through the underground access from the sea to the grotto pond and open the protective grille. That’s how the dolphins escaped. People from the oceanarium in Los Angeles accompanied and supervised this action at the time. They stood by to take care of the animals and helped them to get out into the open.”

“We know the oceanarium. One of the dolphin trainers gave us an important lead on Caden Devlin so we could catch him red-handed. Have you ever noticed that someone has

gained access to the grotto in recent years?”

“No,” she said without thinking for a second. “It’s life-threatening there! A new collapse can happen at any time. That’s what an investigation team confirmed to me when it came to whether I could reopen the sanatorium back then. Of course, I can’t afford to have the grounds permanently monitored, and actually, a fence with warning signs should be enough. Still, someone finds his way into the ruins... After this current incident, I ask myself whether I should have the building completely demolished! Why do you even ask that? Do you know of anyone else hanging around there?”

“No,” Bob said. He did not mention their suspicion that someone had wanted to drive Devlin away.

“It was also very dangerous for you and your friends to go into the sanatorium, to the cove and then to the grotto. You have done good, but please... never be so reckless again!” She waved it off. “I believe the matter is closed now, isn’t it?”

“Right,” Bob lied. “Have you ever actually thought about selling the ruins?” He figured that if someone had been so interested in the site or the grotto that they had wanted to drive Caden Devlin away, they might have approached Mrs Roskin with an offer.

She laughed, but it didn’t sound particularly amused. “Nobody is interested in that death trap, believe me. No—that building almost ruined me, nobody does that to themselves voluntarily. I couldn’t have survived financially without my current clinic. Fortunately, quite a few patients followed me here.” She looked at her watch. “Unfortunately, one of them is now waiting for me. I thank you very much and wish you all the best in your upcoming cases.”

They said goodbye.

Bob wondered whether he should join his friends at the oceanarium, so he called Pete. The Second Investigator reported that they had not made any progress so far.

Bob told Pete briefly about his conversation with Mrs Roskin. “If you don’t need my help, I’m going to the Los Angeles Central Library. I want to search all the newspaper archives for reports about the sanatorium. Maybe we shouldn’t focus too much on the collapse. Something might have happened before or later that might have aroused someone’s interest.”

“What do you think is there?” Pete asked. “A vein of gold in the grounds? A sunken treasure in the grotto pond?”

“You really have a vivid imagination.” Bob laughed. “Seriously—I don’t know but something is there!”

“Then I wish you a successful research,” Pete said.

Bob set off. The Central Library was in the middle of Los Angeles and he had to fight his way through a lot of traffic until he reached the pompous-looking building complex on 5th Street. He knew his way around well enough to quickly find the entrance to the car park and from there the large reading room where there were computer stations for visitors.

Bob searched the online holdings of the daily newspapers for mentions of the sanatorium. Several hits were misleading, some mentioned the ruins only in passing in reports about the nature reserve on the island or in articles about animal therapies.

The decades-old issues of most newspapers were not yet available digitally. Bob had to go to a reading room where paper copies of newspapers were bound into thick leather volumes on the shelves. He went through the seemingly endless volumes and knew that this

could be a long research. After all, he knew the exact date of the collapse and would first look around that period. Perhaps he would come across remarks that opened up connections to events further back in time. It might also be worth looking through old gossip magazines for reports about celebrities who had received treatment there.

He pulled the first collection of magazines from the shelf and began to leaf through them. Dust fluffed up. Shortly afterwards, he dragged several volumes to a small table in a windowless alcove and switched on the desk lamp there. He flipped through countless pages. The library was open until eight o'clock in the evening—so there were only two hours left.

Time passed quickly, but just before he had to leave, he came across a clue that made him suspicious. Then he realized that he and his colleagues had been mistaken on one crucial point, and shortly afterwards, he realized what else it meant—Mrs Roskin had lied to him coldly!

13. Very Important Discoveries

Shortly after Bob had let him know he was going to the library, Pete's mobile phone rang. Zach Canning was calling. He knew they were looking around the place to find out more about Adrian Gish and advised that the director of the oceanarium wanted to speak to The Three Investigators.

"Can you come to the oceanarium café? Find a table outside, on the lawn between the main building and the research centre. Mrs Stone will be there in about ten minutes. I'd join you, but Nicole called in sick, you know, she's my partner in the dolphin show. Her replacement and I are using every spare second to rehearse. It's unusual for the animals to have someone else take Nicole's part."

"You got it," said the Second Investigator.

They went on their way and not five minutes later, they sat down at a free table. A waitress immediately appeared and they each ordered a sundae.

While they were still waiting, a woman came up to them. She might be about forty years old and looked tired. She sat down, blew a brown curl out of her forehead and said: "On behalf of the oceanarium, thank you. I'm Cara Stone, the director." She looked around. No one was close enough to overhear the conversation. "You have averted great financial harm to us. I wouldn't have thought one of our staff would be capable of such a thing."

The waitress came back and served the sundaes the boys had ordered. "Put them on my bill, Angie," Mrs Stone said to the waitress.

"If I had known," Pete said with a grin, "I would have taken the jumbo cup."

"What he's saying," Jupiter added, "is thank you!"

"You've earned it. That you were able to expose Caden Devlin so quickly is truly amazing."

"Unfortunately, sooner than we would have liked," said the First Investigator as he fished a cherry out of the cup.

He told how they had found the tunnel entrance in the cove that led to the partially collapsed grotto and how they had been surprised by Devlin.

"Why do you think it went too fast?" the director asked, confused.

"If he had an accomplice," Jupiter said, "he is now warned and it will be difficult to prove anything against him. He must have heard about Devlin's arrest and had enough time to destroy evidences."

"Hmm..." Mrs Stone nodded. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. I automatically assumed Devlin worked alone."

"We'll see," Pete said. "Do you know if Devlin had any enemies?"

"I didn't know him that well, but he's a rather calm person, I've only seen him get hot-tempered once."

"He did flare up at us in the cave," Pete said.

"—And there he had a good reason," Mrs Stone commented. "I actually don't think he made enemies at work."

The fact that they had so unexpectedly come to meet the director of the oceanarium opened up completely new possibilities for the investigators.

“We would like to do some more background investigation,” Jupiter said. “Perhaps you can help us with that.”

“I don’t know what I could do about that. Our accounting department, in cooperation with the police, is currently looking through all the files that Mr Devlin was involved with. I’m sure I can’t let you look over their shoulders.”

“It would be helpful if we could move freely around the oceanarium, even in the staff area.”

Mrs Stone took out a business card and wrote a few digits on the back before handing it to Jupiter. “I trust you. My mobile number is on this card, and I have written this other number at the back. It is the security code that you can use to open the staff entrance at the back of the oceanarium, next to the emergency exit. Then you can move around freely. Please don’t give this code to anyone... and yes, if anyone should ask, you can say that you are here on an after-school internship.”

“That’s great, thank you!” Jupiter said. “As you know, among other things, Mr Devlin has been logging the demise of fish that he has in fact stolen, which his colleague Adrian Gish confirmed.”

“That’s why you suspect Adrian?”

“It’s not a real suspicion,” Jupiter clarified, “just a lead we want to follow—one of several.”

“I think I might have to disappoint you. It’s quite common that you can’t really truthfully confirm the death of an animal in the tanks because...” She raised her shoulders. “Well, because there’s just nothing left to attach as proof.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pete.

“In larger tanks, aquatic animals often stay for several days in the reef rocks, especially in cavities. They don’t start a search on the first day when they see only six instead of the expected seven. You understand? And when a fish dies, it is not uncommon for nothing to be left of it overnight.”

“How so?” asked Pete, puzzled.

“There are a lot of worms and micro-organisms in the sand of every tank. They can eat an entire fish within a few hours—just a dead animal, of course. In such a case, there is nothing left for anyone to check when the loss is reported. Confirming the loss without evidence is therefore perfectly normal.”

The two friends now realized that there were far more ways to provide a good explanation for a stolen animal than they had thought.

“That exonerates Mr Gish, of course,” Jupiter said.

Mrs Stone nodded. “Is there anything else I can do for you? I mean, apart from giving you a free annual pass?”

Her mobile rang. She mumbled an apology when she saw the number. “I’m afraid I’ll have to take this.” She answered the call.

“Yes?” For a few seconds she listened, then mumbled a “hmm...” before saying: “I’ll talk to him.” Then there was a pause. “Yes you are, in an hour... yes... yes, I’ll sit down at a table with him. Tell Hill.”

She hung up. “Sorry, guys. You wouldn’t believe what my job entails.”

“Are the demonstrators causing trouble?” asked Pete.

She looked at him in surprise. “How do you know?”

“I had a little chat with Mr Hill the other day.”

“It’s not just trouble... Hill is... well, he’s wrong on a number of points, but basically he’s quite a reasonable person. You can talk to him.” Mrs Stone stood up. “If you have any

questions, you can call me.”

After she left, Jupiter and Pete finished their sundaes and discussed how to proceed. A little later, the First Investigator’s mobile phone rang. It was Bob.

“Are you alone?”

“We are,” the First Investigator assured him. Although Pete looked curious, Jupiter did not put it on speaker so that no one else could overhear.

“We got it wrong, and Mrs Roskin lied to me coldly.”

“What do you mean we got it wrong?”

“We were not in the grotto under the sanatorium.”

Jupe hesitated. “Uh, Bob, are you all right? Sure we were there... or are you saying we imagined it?”

“No! We were in a cave, yes... but it’s not part of the sanatorium grotto! Do you remember that we wondered how dolphin therapies could be conducted in that tiny pond? And that we thought that cavern was just a small part of the grotto that hadn’t collapsed? Wrong!”

“How did you arrive at this?”

“There’s an old magazine report about the sanatorium, with many glossy photos of the grotto and the pond... The photo spread shows every nook and cranny, and nothing looked remotely like the cave we’ve been in. There was definitely no tunnel that you can walk in from the sea side to the grotto either... and there’s more... in the report, Mrs Roskin is quoted as saying: ‘... I built the sanatorium over the grotto, and the only above-ground access to the grotto is through the building.’”

“So... what do you know about—”

Bob didn’t let him finish. “In my meeting with Mrs Roskin, I told her about how we went from the cove, through the tunnel to get to the grotto—at least that was what we thought was the grotto—and guess what? She did not correct me! As far as I know, there has been and still is no access from the sea side to the grotto. It’s clear to me that that cavern we went to, the same one that Devlin stashed the stolen fish, is not the sanatorium grotto. Mrs Roskin is covering something up!”

“Hmm... interesting...” Jupe commented. “It begs the question—why is she lying to you and trying to make you think we were at the grotto?”

“We still have to find out, but the fact that she lied proves that she has something to hide. At first I thought it was about a drug story she was implicated in once during her time as head of the sanatorium, but that incident wasn’t about her at all, it was about one of her patients.”

“What else did you find out?”

“Here’s the real kicker. I came across the name Zachary Canning!”

“Our Zach Canning?”

“That’s the one. He was employed by Mrs Roskin at the time—as a trainer for the dolphins used for therapy in the grotto. Why didn’t he tell us about it? We talked so much about the sanatorium. If he worked there, surely he knows all about it! But he acted as if Caden Devlin had led him to a place completely foreign to him. That doesn’t add up at all! We can’t trust him anymore.”

The First Investigator exhaled noisily. “So he’s been giving us the run-around! I wonder if we really saw him stalking Devlin on the first day? Or was there something else going on altogether?”

“Both Mrs Roskin and Zach Canning are lying to us,” Bob summarized. “The question is—why?”

14. Stranded at the Cove

“You go back to the ruins, Bob, and look around to see if you can spot anything we’ve missed so far,” Jupiter decided. “We’ll wait here until Canning gets off work and tail him!” In this respect, the access code they had received from the director proved extremely helpful as they could move freely around the staff area.

“Agreed,” Bob said and hung up.

Jupiter briefly informed Pete of Bob’s report in a whisper and they agreed that they now had to deal immediately with both Mrs Roskin and Zach Canning. This was—especially since the conversation with Mrs Stone—far more promising than the assumption that Adrian Gish might have been involved in the fish theft.

Canning and Roskin knew each other from before. Did that mean they were still in contact? What did they have to hide?

Jupiter and Pete made their way to the car park.

“We should fix a transmitter on Canning’s van,” suggested the Second Investigator, but then they noticed a small group of people whose attention they would inevitably attract in such an action. They were the demonstrators who had taken up position again.

Pete noticed that fewer people were here compared to last time. Of course, David Hill, the organizer and chief demonstrator, was there again. The Second Investigator recognized him from a distance by his lean build, puffy full beard and white floppy cap. The demonstrators peacefully presented their ‘Dolphins Belong in the Ocean’ banner. They approached all the people who had visited the oceanarium, but never appeared pushy.

A little later, the oceanarium closed its doors and the demonstrators also left. Pete took the transmitter from Jupiter’s backpack and attached it on the bumper of Zach Canning’s van. From now on, they could see on the receiver where the dolphin trainer was going. They had to keep within range or the signal would be lost.

After about half an hour, Canning went to his van, got in and left the car park.

The two investigators waited a while. Thanks to the transmitter, it was easy to keep enough distance such that Canning would not notice them this time.

“He’s not going to the coast road,” Jupiter noted. “So his destination is probably not the island and the ruins, at least not by a direct route.”

Pete drove off.

“We have to be careful now,” Jupiter warned, “because he will recognize your car. Luckily for the transmitter, we can be a little further behind.”

Jupiter kept an eye on the receiver and guided his friend through the city. At first, they thought they were going to Hollywood, but in fact Canning was heading for Atwater Village, a small neighbourhood south of Glendale. There he stopped in a quiet residential area.

The Second Investigator went to a neighbouring street. Jupiter jumped out of the car and peered around an intersection. He saw the brown van parked beside a white car in the driveway of a detached house. Canning was at the front door. He opened it and went in.

After a few seconds, the First Investigator crept closer and could see the letterbox from the street. It said: ‘Z. Canning’. So they had followed him all the way home.

Jupe rejoined Pete and Pete moved his MG to another location so that they could both keep an eye on the house.

Bob decided to park his car on the mainland instead of on the island. He wanted to remain inconspicuous and give no hint of his presence in case Canning, Roskin or anyone else also turned up at the ruins. He walked across the bridge. There was no car in the public car park, so in all probability Bob was alone on the island.

A few minutes later, he squeezed through the hole in the wire-mesh fence and climbed through the window opening into the ruins. If his reasoning was correct, there could be another entrance to the real grotto.

Bob roamed the great hall. Why were Canning and Mrs Roskin lying? According to The Three Investigators' suspicions, they had wanted to drive Caden Devlin away from this place—but why? What was going on here? And how were they staging those alleged tremors?

Bob discovered nothing new on the ground floor and he did not dare to use the dilapidated stairs to go up again. So he went down, to the locked former entrance to the grotto. Here too, he found nothing significant. The window to the courtyard, under which they had discovered the transport container with the candy basslet, was still open.

Bob decided to have another look in the cave. Maybe there were still traces in Devlin's former storage for the stolen animals. Perhaps Zach Canning had tampered with it and set up some kind of loudspeakers to simulate the noise of a collapse, or he had left some other clues.

Shortly afterwards, Bob stood on the cliffs above the cove. He climbed down and balanced on the stones towards the hidden tunnel entrance. The water was rising at the moment. In less than an hour, the tide would be at its peak, which meant that Bob would get his feet really wet trying to get behind the rocks to the entrance. That didn't bother him, though.

Carefully, he waded through shallow water between jagged rocks—a tiny puddle of water in which silvery fish scurried away. The bottom was slippery with algae threads. Bob was careful not to lose his balance, and shortly after, he had his feet back on dry stones with relief. He reached the higher rocks that hid the entrance, squeezed through... and stood rooted to the spot!

Sounds emanated outside from the tunnel. First footsteps echoing off the walls, then a woman's voice cursing under her breath. Was that Mrs Roskin? Bob didn't think so.

The footsteps and voice seemed to come in his direction, so he had to hide, and quickly!

Bob hurried back through the tiny puddle between the jagged rocks—and slipped. With difficulty, he suppressed a cry as his right foot slipped forward and he lost his balance. He shifted his weight to his left foot, causing it to slide backwards and buckle. A sharp pain shot into his ankle and through his whole foot. Then Bob landed backwards in the water. The cold gave him an additional shock. He just managed to avoid hitting his head, but got wet from top to bottom. He wiped his eyes and looked behind him.

Here he lay as if on display! Whoever came out of the tunnel would be able to see him immediately.

Bob pushed himself up, stood up—and immediately slumped down again. His left foot hurt. He had probably broken it.

Bob got down on his knees, pushed himself on all fours until he came to dry stones. Now, for the time being, he was only in the makeshift cover of larger rocks... but only until the person came out into the open. In fact, there could be more than just one person, he thought in frustration.

Hastily Bob looked around. There was no other choice. There was no hiding place he could reach, not even if he could have run or climbed normally, and certainly not if he had to crawl on all fours.

He listened. Someone was coming out of the tunnel at that moment—directly behind the rocks. Bob had only one chance—if this person went around the rocks, he had to do it too—only around the back. Then he would be in front of the cave entrance, while the other person would have the cove in front.

He braced himself. Raging pain pulsed in his left foot as he put weight on it. Tears welled up in his eyes. He heard the footsteps... pushed himself in the other direction, kept close to the rock and limped forward.

Bob expected to be found at any moment. However, he heard the other person going away, apparently heading back to the sanatorium. Bob leaned on his side, carefully pushed back a little on his knees until he could peek around the rock.

It was Nicole!

What was she doing here? Clearly, she was not only Zach Canning's partner in the dolphin show, but also his accomplice for... whatever they were doing here. Obviously Nicole had been in the cave to do something after The Three Investigators got rid of Caden Devlin.

The woman climbed up and soon disappeared from Bob's sight. Bob had to inform his friends! He reached into his trouser pocket to take out his mobile phone.

It was not there!

Now it was Bob who was swearing under his breath. He must have lost it in his fall or the crawl afterwards! Bob crawled out of his cover, hoping to see his mobile phone lying somewhere—but this hope was dashed. It had probably slipped out of his pocket when he fell and was now lying in the small pond.

Bob crawled there on all fours, looked into the clear water and actually found his phone among the algae. Without much hope, Bob tried to turn it on. Nothing happened. The device had not survived the minutes under water.

Bob closed his eyes for a moment. This didn't look good at all. He couldn't get out of here with his injured foot, and he wouldn't be able to climb up and leave the cove on all fours. It was far too steep.

Now without a mobile phone, he could not call for help. He was stuck in the cove, and as if that wasn't bad enough, he couldn't even tell his friends about Nicole's appearance.

The pain in his foot was now throbbing so strongly that he could hardly think. Nevertheless, it was clear to him that he had to do something... Only what?

15. A Bizarre Collaboration

While Jupiter and Pete waited in the car, it was getting dark and they were just thinking about calling off the stake-out for the day, when the dolphin trainer left his house. He was wearing a black jacket and a dark hat. Canning walked briskly to the white car and drove off.

“Now we have a bit of problem,” Pete said as he drove off. “Our transmitter is on his van. Without that, we have to follow him closer.”

“Luckily it is darker now,” Jupe added, “so he might not notice us.”

“I hope we are not following him out for dinner,” Pete remarked. “I’m hungry, but I guess we cannot join him for a meal!”

Pete kept the necessary distance behind the white car and soon it became clear that they were heading back to the oceanarium.

When they approached the oceanarium, they noticed that Canning did not park his car in the car park, but on a side street.

They saw that the car park was empty—which was not surprising considering the late hour. It was in the dark, with only the building’s illuminated lettering providing dim light. There was a white van parked close to the staff entrance.

Jupiter quickly got out, while Pete drove on to park inconspicuously somewhere else.

The First Investigator moved slowly and crouched down towards the staff entrance. He knew the access code and could follow Canning into the building.

Suddenly Jupiter noticed a dark figure. Directly along the building of the oceanarium, someone was also scurrying towards the staff entrance!

The First Investigator remained motionless so as not to draw attention to himself. Even from a distance, he recognized who was hanging around in front—the gaunt figure, the full beard, the white floppy cap... that was David Hill, the demonstrator! What was he doing here?

Then Pete came. Jupiter told him to be quiet and drew his attention to the unexpected visitor.

Hill keyed something into the keypad and the staff entrance opened. He disappeared inside, the door closing behind him.

“Where did he get the access code?” asked Pete. True, the director Mrs Stone had given it to The Three Investigators, but she was unlikely to place the same trust in a man who was, in a sense, demonstrating against her. “—And what does he want here?”

“Maybe he wants to do more than just demonstrate against the dolphinarium,” Jupiter said. “Perhaps an act of sabotage?”

“We have to go after him!” said Pete. “Have you seen Canning yet? Is he in there too?”

“I don’t know. We mustn’t get caught—not by anyone! Let’s go!”

The two scurried across the dark car park. At the staff entrance, they quickly looked around. There was no one to be seen. Jupiter keyed in the code. It worked, and they could enter.

The adjoining corridor was empty. Now it proved to be an advantage that they already knew their way around the place. If they heard something, they could dodge and hide somewhere to observe.

Where should they look first?

They went in the direction of the dolphinarium. If Hill really wanted to commit sabotage, it stood to reason that he would tamper there, or maybe he wanted to plant evidence to show how badly the animals were doing in captivity.

Making their way to the dolphinarium also meant getting close to Zach Canning's office—and the dolphin trainer was, after all, the very reason they had come here. Should they split up and each pursue a suspect? In any case, the men could run into each other. Hill's appearance had complicated everything!

The two friends decided to stay together and stalked forward through the almost dark corridor, past the closed doors. Only one was open. That was the passage from the staff area to the dolphinarium's auditorium!

"Someone's in there," Jupiter whispered.

Pete crept on, got down on his knees and peeked past the door frame. He beckoned Jupiter to him. "We can hide behind the back row of seats," he whispered.

A few seconds later, they were crouched there and could look towards the large pool where the dolphin show had taken place.

David Hill and a second man were standing about thirty metres away from the two investigators on the wide edge of the pool. The other man was wearing a jacket with the collar turned up and a dark hat that covered most of his face—the exact same hat that Zach Canning had worn earlier coming out of his house!

Hill was meeting with Canning! The two did not look as if they were surprised about it. rather, they were talking animatedly, even though not a word could be heard by the two boys. Did they know each other? Had they not come here at the same time by chance?

"What are they doing here?" whispered Pete.

Jupiter did not answer. The next few seconds spoke for themselves. Both men tugged at the ends of a net and pulled a dolphin out of the pool. The animal did not move. Could it be... dead... or drugged?

Only now did Pete notice the frame that was placed on the edge of the pool. He had seen this wheelbarrow-like thing with handles on both sides before—in Zach Canning's office. Only it had been folded up there.

The men heaved the motionless animal on the frame. Water beaded off it.

"A dolphin stretcher," Jupiter whispered. "You can use it to transport dolphins overland for a while if you water them every now and then."

"You mean..."

"Yes, those two are stealing the dolphin!"

16. Tailing the Thieves

Zach Canning and David Hill lifted the stretcher with the dolphin and carried it from the edge of the pool to the auditorium and up the stands. No doubt—they would bring the dolphin through the open door into the staff area. In the process, they would pass very close to Jupiter and Pete.

The two investigators crawled to the side on all fours in the cover of the row of chairs. There they lay flat on the ground. They only saw the men's legs between the seats, and then heard the door close.

"Why on earth would they steal a dolphin?" whispered Jupiter as they got up and scurried to the door.

"David Hill is supposed to be a radical animal rights activist," Pete said. "Maybe he doesn't want to steal the animal, but free it!"

"—But why is Canning, of all people, helping him?" Jupe wondered. "It doesn't add up!"

The Second Investigator carefully opened the door a gap and peered into the corridor. On the floor, he could see from a clearly visible trail of water drops that the dolphin thieves had taken the path towards the exit. Pete scurried into the corridor and beckoned Jupiter to follow him.

They heard the men further ahead. Just as they must have been about to exit the building, there was a rumble as the dolphin stretcher bumped something. The boys paused.

"Careful, you fool!" they heard Canning say.

The door to the outside opened. The men apparently carried the animal outside to the white van. Someone like Canning naturally knew how to transport a dolphin. He had certainly done it many times before, bringing injured animals from the sea to the dolphinarium or back into the wild.

When the engine started, Pete peeked out into the open. The van rolled off, with David Hill driving. After a few seconds, it turned onto the road.

"Come on, Jupe! To my car! We'll go after them!"

They ran to Pete's MG, quickly got in, and Pete immediately drove off. The van was already out of sight.

"Unfortunately, we don't have a transmitter for this van," Jupe said, "but I can bet where they are heading... to the sanatorium."

However, it quickly became clear that the two men did not choose the direct route to the island, instead, they drove along the coastal road towards Long Beach.

"I still can't get something out of my mind," Jupe said.

"That Canning is working with Hill?" Pete wondered.

"No. It's Canning with that hat and the jacket with the collar turned up."

"They just know that they could be discovered, and that there is a camera that monitors the dolphin pool."

Jupe only nodded.

Silence reigned in the car for a short time.

Then Pete asked: "What do you think they're going to do with the dolphin?"

"I don't know. Let's say they really are going to the island. Why are they taking the dolphin there? They can't just put it in the cave pond like the candy basslet. The pond is much too small and apart from that, there are—" the First Investigator's breath caught as he realized something. "The grotto! Pete, how could I have been so blind! The dolphin must be in the water and the pond in the cave would be much too small. This is a clear indication that there is indeed still a way into the sanatorium grotto! They are taking the dolphin into the grotto pond which must still be accessible. Mrs Roskin, as owner, has had twenty years to clean up the aftermath of the collapse."

"If she really did it secretly, that explains why she keeps everyone away with fences and warning signs," added the Second Investigator. "No one must discover this! But why? What are she and Canning hiding there? And why are they bringing another dolphin into the grotto pond now?"

Jupe pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. "I'll call Bob. He has to be extra careful and not get caught by those two!"

The First Investigator pressed Bob's number... but he didn't answer. Had something happened to him? Had he possibly been discovered in the ruins and caught?

Pete tried to distract himself from worrying about his friend. "Tell me something, Jupe—why on earth is Canning going about it in such a roundabout way?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he steals an animal from the dolphinarium. Wouldn't it be much more inconspicuous to go out to sea in a boat, catch a dolphin, anaesthetize it and bring it from there to the grotto? Surely this guy knows how to do that?"

"In principle, you're right. He would certainly have access to a boat suitable for it. I don't suppose it's just any dolphin he's after."

"But this one in particular?" asked Pete. "Why?"

"Because this dolphin is specially trained. He can do things that other dolphins can't."

"Tricks like we saw in the dolphinarium? But what's the point? Canning is hardly going to put on a show in secret."

"They need the skills for something else. Maybe Canning taught this dolphin something else." The First Investigator sighed. "—Though I have no idea what that might be, but we'll find out."

Shortly afterwards, David Hill turned onto the bridge to the island. Pete couldn't follow without being spotted, so they stopped on the mainland, got out and ran across the bridge to the island.

Pete was the first to reach a spot from where he could see the car park. The gaunt man was by now no longer wearing his white floppy cap—and Pete saw him clearly enough to be sure that he had never seen that man before. "But... but just now it was David Hill!"

Jupiter came to a halt beside his friend, panting. "That's just not it, Pete. That's what struck me as odd earlier—that Canning masks himself so well, but Hill apparently doesn't hide such important identifying features as the full beard or the floppy cap. The truth is rather Canning's accomplice deliberately masqueraded as Hill in order to draw suspicion to the leader of the demonstrators!"

Pete shook his head in disbelief.

The two men now unloaded the dolphin and doused it with water from canisters they got from the van. Then they grabbed the handles of the stretcher and marched off.

The boys ran crouched behind. They had to keep up or they wouldn't find their way to the grotto.

Instead of going to the familiar hole in the fence, the two men went to a locked gate in the fence. From the cover of a bush, the investigators watched as the two men put down the dolphin stretcher. Canning took a key from his pocket, removed the lock and chain and pushed the gate open. Then they carried the dolphin through.

“Wait!” said Canning to his accomplice. “I’ll lock the gate again.”

However, the other man did not stop. “I’m not putting this stretcher down again. My arms are already longer than before. We’ll close the gate later.”

Pete had to pull himself together not to cheer loudly. “Perfect, we can go right through!”

The two investigators followed the men, who first walked along the fence through the grounds—and then actually hoisted the dolphin through the glassless window into the interior of the ruins.

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter and Pete looked cautiously into the reception hall. The traces of water revealed that the two men had already made their way down the staircase.

The friends also climbed through the window, hurried to the spiral staircase and listened. They heard a low groan and a curse: “Bloody heavy, that beast!”

Pete crept down a few steps. Judging by the drops of water on the ground, the men had not taken the path to the window that led to the inner courtyard. Instead, they went to where the former entrance to the grotto was—the collapsed staircase that was secured by a locked metal bar gate. The Second Investigator silently scurried further down, crouched on the lowest steps, peered in the direction of the animal thieves.

The dolphin stretcher was on the ground. Canning fiddled with the lock on the gate, took it out and swung open the gate. Then the men grabbed the stretcher and carried it into the stairwell.

However, The Three Investigators had earlier seen through the bars of the gate that the stairs led to a mountain of rubble and rocks! The two men wouldn’t just go down a blocked staircase... unless there was a secret way through... to the grotto!

17. The Alternate Access

The men went down the stairs. Pete heard footsteps, then a rumbling and a dragging sound. Eventually, it became quiet.

Finally, the Second Investigator stood up and beckoned Jupiter to come down to him. The two friends hurried to the stairwell and looked down. It looked the same as before—fifteen, maybe twenty steps lay exposed before the collapse—a mountain of rubble and debris that was impossible to pass.

Impossible? However, the men were gone... so they had succeeded, complete with a dolphin stretcher and the stunned animal!

Was this collapse not real? Was it some kind of optical illusion? Bits of rock made of *papier-mâché*? Was part of it perhaps a cleverly painted canvas that could be folded to the side—drawn in such a way that it looked real to an observer from the top of the stairwell?

Already on the way down, the boys were sure that this could not be the case. This mountain of rocks and boulders not only looked real—it was real. At the latest, when they touched everything, that was immovably certain, in the truest sense of the word.

Only a little light fell into the stairwell from above. The boys switched on their flashlights and went searching.

“There must be a hidden entrance,” Jupiter said, “a secret door, a... aha!” He pointed to a step about halfway down. “Look at that!”

The dolphin stretcher had also left a trail of water drops on its way here and a puddle even collected at the edge of this step. Apparently the men had left the stretcher there for a short time.

“There must be something here,” said Pete. At first glance he couldn’t see anything, and at second glance he still couldn’t see anything. He scanned the surrounding wall but there was nothing.

“I’ve got it,” Jupiter whispered excitedly, pointing to the bottom of the wall on the right side. There was a small round protrusion there just above the water puddle. Jupiter touched it and found that it was a small round metal plate that was painted in the colour of the wall to camouflage it.

“This must be the mechanism that opens the entrance,” Jupiter said. “Do you remember what Bob told us? It was a quote from Mrs Roskin saying that she built the building over the only above-ground access to the grotto. Apparently, after the earthquake, she made sure that there was a second, secret way in... Pete, ready? I’m going to open the passage. We have to be careful.”

Jupiter pushed the metal plate. There was a clacking sound followed by a scraping sound—the grinding of stone on stone. An area in the wall, as large as a door, first slid back and then to the side. Behind the opening, it was pitch dark.

Jupiter scurried through followed by Pete. They switched off their flashlights as a precaution.

Not a sound was heard... until the scraping started again. The secret door closed automatically and clicked into place.

Pete gasped for air. Surely there was a similar mechanism to open the door again. Nevertheless, he felt as if he were being buried alive. His breathing was hurried, his fingers groped for the switch of his flashlight. However, the flashlight slipped from his trembling hands and fell to the ground. The Second Investigator heard a stifled groan and only realized afterwards that it came from himself.

“Stay calm, Pete,” Jupiter said in a voice far less calm than the three words suggested.

“Turn on the light!”

The First Investigator followed the request and immediately everything no longer seemed so horribly oppressive. Pete could breathe again. His flashlight was right in front of him on the ground. He picked it up, switched it on as well and shone a light on the surroundings.

They were standing at the top of a second stairwell, which apparently ran parallel to the first—except that it was much narrower and, above all, had not collapsed.

Pete’s panic attack was over. He shielded the light of the lamp with his hand, and went ahead of Juve. “Come on!”

One after the other, they took step after step and soon the staircase ended in front of a wall.

“Dead end,” said the Second Investigator, puzzled.

“There must be another similar hidden door,” Jupiter said. He purposefully searched the wall, and quickly found it. This time the metal plate switch was on the left side, and he promptly pushed it.

A second secret door opened. They looked into a dimly lit passageway.

“Lights out,” Jupiter ordered.

Again Pete went forward and slowly realized where they were now. Juve had also realized it, and he whispered to Pete: “The secret staircase we just came out from was created to go around the collapsed part of the original staircase! Now we are back on the original staircase from the sanatorium to the grotto!”

“Ingenious!” whispered Pete.

“Come on,” Jupiter insisted, “and be quiet!”

They went down the rest of the original staircase and then along a dead-straight passageway that soon opened into a spacious cavern. It was as large as a hall, except that it was underground and the walls were made of angular, furrowed rock.

It was the grotto! Nothing indicated that it had ever collapsed.

A power generator hummed. Several lamps with bright white fluorescent tubes lit up the place. There was the pond and it was at least ten times the size of the one in the small cave by the cove.

The stretcher lay next to the pond with the stunned dolphin still resting on it. A second dolphin was swimming in the water.

Other lamps illuminated a kind of glass room in front of the rear rock wall, a structure made of glass or plastic panes held together by metal struts. The two men—and a woman—were inside. Jupiter and Pete recognized her immediately. It was Nicole, Canning’s partner in the dolphin show!

Didn’t she call in sick? Apparently she was in cahoots with Canning and Roskin.

“What are they doing?” whispered Pete. “They steal dolphins and build a glass room in a secret grotto? We’ve met a lot of weird characters over the years, but—”

“Later!” interrupted Jupiter. “We hide and watch them. Whatever is going on here, it—”

“Juve,” Pete hissed. “Get away from this entrance, quick!”

“Why?”

“The scraping! The secret door is opening! Someone’s coming!”

They scurried on crouching, keeping close to the wall. With beating hearts, they stopped and looked around. There was no good hiding place in the grotto—the generator, the lamps, the glass room structure—none of it offered cover.

“The pond,” Pete hissed.

They had to go into the water to reach one or two makeshift hiding places, as the pond was irregularly shaped with some bulges and nooks behind larger rocks. At least from the glass room, one could not see the entire opposite bank.

They hurried over and put their feet in the water—it was freezing cold! Undeterred, they slid down into the pond up to their necks. They were out of breath from the cold and all their muscles ached. They had to move their arms and legs to stay at least a little warm.

The dolphin swam up, stretched its snout out of the water and looked at the two of them before going back down into the water. They squeezed to the edge of the steeply sloping shore and kept their heads low. Pete peered cautiously at the entrance to the grotto and saw who had just come in.

It was an elderly lady that Jupe and Pete had not seen before but it was clear that she was Mrs Roskin! She walked purposefully to the glass house but did not look into the pond.

Zach Canning came towards her. “We got him.”

“Any problems?”

“No. Hill will be suspected in any case. There’s no trail leading to me, and we got rid of the boys too. Everything’s going fine.”

“Good,” said Mrs Roskin. “It’s been too much trouble from the time the dolphin got hurt!”

Then they both went into the glass room.

Jupiter and Pete dared to move again. They crawl with their hands in the water and moved along the edge of the shore behind one of the rocks. From there, they could see into the glass house.

There were various chemistry laboratory equipment such as beakers, test-tubes, and Bunsen burners, spread out on several tables. On another table were metal boxes, canisters, plastic tubes, and packets containing a white substance.

“Looks like a laboratory,” Pete whispered.

“That’s it!” Jupiter whispered back. “Remember Bob mentioning a drug incident in Mrs Roskin’s past? Also, Canning told us he once took drugs himself... and we’ve come across the Coast Guard twice. They have a lot of jobs, but do you know what the statistics say is the main problem they’re having to face to an ever-increasing degree? Drug trafficking!”

“You mean this is a drug lab?” said Pete. “Roskin, Canning and the others are processing drugs here? With dolphins?” The Second Investigator shivered as he spoke. The water was so cold that by now they were trembling continuously.

Jupiter pointed to the dolphin, which was again sticking its head and upper body out of the water. “Look at the dorsal fin!”

Pete looked more closely. A small plastic container dangled from the fin. All at once he understood. “I don’t believe it! The drugs they have here—”

“—They attach them to the dolphins,” Jupiter finished the sentence. “Remember what Canning told us at the dolphin show about the military training dolphins to swim at enemy units and detonate bombs there? These criminals exploit the animals’ abilities just as brazenly. The difference is that they send the trained dolphins out through the underground access into the open sea to swim far out to boats to deliver the drugs. There... Oh, get down, Pete!” Jupiter gasped and immediately lowered his head into the water.

Pete did the same. The water was clear enough for the boys to get their bearings. They moved to another part of the pool and only there did their heads rise above the surface again.

Canning had come out from the lab. “The anaesthetic is wearing off,” he said to Nicole, who was walking beside him. “Percy is waking up.”

“Then put him in the pond.”

Fortunately, the two investigators were reasonably out of sight.

Zach and Nicole grabbed the dolphin, which was moving slightly. They lifted him off the stretcher and let him slide into the pond. The coldness of the water seemed to revive him as he swam away immediately.

The second dolphin came towards his fellow dolphin, nudged him and then turned away—directly towards Jupiter and Pete!

Canning followed the dolphins with his gaze... and in the next moment, he exclaimed: “Damn, those rascals are here!”

18. Everything is Revealed

Pete wasted no time. He pulled himself out of the water and helped Jupiter out. Then they stormed off, but Canning went after them.

Now Mrs Roskin and the second man also came out of the lab. That looked bad. The two friends ran around the pond towards the passageway. It was the only possible escape route!

However, Canning was already ahead of them at the exit, blocking it. Jupe rushed off to the side, with Pete in the opposite direction.

The First Investigator ran towards Mrs Roskin. She dodged him with a horrified look, but the second man was there and managed to grab Jupiter. He brutally bent his arm behind his back.

Pete hurried around the pond, in the meantime pursued by Canning. The entrance to the lab was open, and no one was in there. Pete saw no other possibility. He ran inside, and slammed the door behind him.

What now? He could not possibly entrench himself here permanently. He looked around. There were the canisters... the packets with the processed drugs... a Bunsen burner...

He had a few seconds at most. He grabbed a lighter with an extended nozzle and ignited a Bunsen burner. A small jet of flame blazed out of the opening. Then he grabbed a couple of the packets.

At that very moment, Canning yanked the door open.

Pete held the flame close to the drug packets. "Back off or—"

The dolphin trainer laughed. "You can burn that stuff if you want. Cost us a few thousand dollars, but after that, you're going down."

Despite the cocky words, Canning remained standing. He probably wouldn't take the loss quite so easily after all.

Pete also paused... until the second man appeared in the doorway with Jupiter in tow. "Put that stuff down or I'll break your friend's arm."

The First Investigator groaned. Sweat appeared on his forehead.

Pete dropped the packets. He held on to the Bunsen burner but didn't turn it off. A crazy thought occurred to him—what if he set fire to cause chaos? He could...

"Enough with the theatrics!" Mrs Roskin's voice boomed through the grotto. She pushed the men aside and came into the lab, her hands clenched into fists. "Do you think I prepared this for years, devote half my life to this business, and then have it destroyed by a couple of... brats?" She shouted the last word, her voice cracking. Then she glared at Pete. "Turn off the Bunsen burner, and afterwards you sit there on that chair and don't move! Come on, or your friend will pay!"

The Second Investigator had no choice but to obey. He switched off the burner, put it on the table and sat down on the chair.

The stranger pushed Jupiter forward towards Pete. "Sit there with your friend!"

Jupiter staggered and caught himself with difficulty. He rubbed his arm and also took a seat.

"All this is ingenious," the First Investigator then said. "How did you manage to do this, Mrs Roskin? When did you realize that the grotto hadn't collapsed at all?"

“You are in no position to ask any questions,” she snapped at him. “Instead, you will tell me how you found us!”

“Just a minute, Sarah!” Zach Canning stood in front of Pete with his arms crossed. “Where’s your friend Bob?” That’s exactly what Jupiter and Pete were wondering.

“At our headquarters in Rocky Beach,” the Second Investigator lied. “While we were watching the oceanarium, he stayed there to check on some information about the sanatorium on the Internet. We realized there must still be some secret. Bob is—”

“That’s enough!” The dolphin trainer turned to Mrs Roskin. “The third boy knows they’re here. That’s not good at all.”

“He doesn’t know,” Jupe jumped at Pete’s tall tale. “How could he? We watched you abduct the dolphin and followed you. We haven’t been able to tell Bob about it yet.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You have mobile phones.”

“We can’t reach him.” At least that was true. “—And we didn’t know until very late that we were coming into the grotto... which I find fascinating, by the way. I’m guessing you didn’t build the secret staircase until after the collapse, right? When you realized that the earthquake wasn’t as devastating as you first thought, you discovered that the grotto was still accessible or could just be made accessible again.”

“—And it cost me a lot of effort and nerves,” Mrs Roskin said. “Do you have any idea how much preparation goes into an operation like this? And the secrecy to keep everyone believing that the grotto had completely collapsed? All the interviews, the closing of the sanatorium, the thousand conversations with the staff...” She shook her head. “I won’t let you spoil the fruits of this labour!”

“So the accusations against you were true back then,” Jupiter said. “You were indeed peddling illicit drugs, and it was almost discovered, but you were able to get your head out of the noose. Then, when the earthquake caused the collapse, you recognized the unique opportunity to get an absolutely secret location for this laboratory—and it was not only excellently hidden, but thanks to the dolphins, it offered the perfect opportunity to abuse the animals as drug mules!”

“Cut the rubbish!” demanded Nicole, who had also stepped into the lab in the meantime. “What are we going to do with these guys? And how do we put their friend out of action?”

“We’ll lure Bob here,” said Canning. “Pete is to call him on a pretext. We give him the exact text so he doesn’t play any tricks—”

“We can’t reach Bob,” Jupiter declared again.

“Shut up!” the unknown man yelled at him.

“You shut up, Vince! A phone call is risky, Zach,” Mrs Roskin said. “These fellows are clever. They found us here, after all.”

Zach Canning grinned. “I’ve tricked them before and let them do my dirty work.” He turned to the two investigators. “Remember? When you guys were looking for me at the oceanarium and I confronted you? It was easy to tell you a tall tale and get you to trust me.”

“—Which we saw through in the end though,” the First Investigator added.

“Oh yeah?” asked Canning, “and who’s trapped in our lab now?” His partner in crime Vince laughed.

“Sure...” Jupiter admitted and spontaneously thought up another tall tale to provoke an argument between their opponents. “—But your mistake has not gone unnoticed, Mr Canning. We noticed that you contradicted yourself. Once you said you didn’t know Mrs Roskin and had never been to this grotto... Then you boasted that you used to work here at the sanatorium as a dolphin trainer. Lying has to be learned, my friend.”

“You did... what?” Sarah Roskin snapped at Canning.

“Hey, I never said that,” Canning defended himself, which was true.

“Admit it, Mr Canning, you made a mistake...” Jupiter lied blithely on. “That put us on the right track in the first place.”

“Idiot!” Mrs Roskin was seething with anger.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Nicole intervened. “There are completely different problems! We have to get rid of these two and then take care of the other one.”

Vince came closer, raised his fists threateningly. “I can think of various ways...”

Pete’s stomach slipped down a floor. “Wait, we—”

He never finished the sentence—because at that moment, first two, then four and finally six officers of the Coast Guard stormed the grotto, with their weapons at the ready!

While Mrs Roskin, Zach and Nicole stood frozen, Vince took two quick steps, stood behind Pete and put his arm around his neck.

“Let him go!” Mrs Roskin ordered him.

“We need a hostage!” Vince argued.

“There are six officers with guns!”

“Stop it,” Zach Canning also demanded and his accomplice gave up.

In fact, they would not have stood a chance against the superior strength of the law-enforcement officers. The men handcuffed the criminals while Jupiter quickly put them in the picture.

Now Bob also hobbled into the grotto, with wet clothes and leaning on a large branch, which he used like a crutch.

“That was really last minute,” Pete said with relief. “Bob, how did you do it?”

“When I got to the island, I looked around the ruins—and found nothing. So I went through the underground car park into the cove, thinking maybe I’d find some clues in the cave. However, Nicole showed up there, I had to hide, but I slipped, landed in the water and broke my foot, I’m afraid. My mobile phone fell into the water as well.” So that’s why they were not able to reach him!

“What were you doing in the cave anyway?” Bob asked Nicole, who was already being led away.

She looked venomously at Bob. “We had a camera hidden between the rocks to monitor Devlin. I went to remove it.”

One of the officers pulled them on.

“I could hardly tread,” Bob continued, “let alone climb up out of the cove... and I couldn’t let you know either. I didn’t know what to do—until I saw a Coast Guard boat. I managed to get their attention, and one of the officers swam to me and took me into the boat. I tried to call you guys, but you didn’t answer—”

“There’s no reception in the grotto, unless our mobile phones are down too,” Jupiter said. “We also took an involuntary bath... in the pond.”

“Anyway, I told the Coast Guard why I was here and about our suspicion that there must be an entrance to the grotto. I led them into the ruins and saw that the gate to the grotto here was opened, unlike before. It was clear then that this must be the way in!”

“So you discovered the secret staircase?”

“It took me ten minutes,” Bob said with a grin.

One of the officers came up to them. His name tag read ‘Capt Gentry’. “You’ve done well, boy, and so did you two! We knew there had to be a drug lab here somewhere, on the island or nearby on the coast, maybe in Long Beach, but we never found it.”

Mrs Roskin scowled at The Three Investigators as she was led away past them.

“Now that things have changed,” Jupiter said to her kindly, “perhaps you will allow me to ask you a question, unlike before.”

“Why should I answer you?” she sneered back.

“—Because I’m sure the judge will like it if you are cooperative.”

Captain Gentry nodded. “When the boy is right, he is right.”

Mrs Roskin was silent with her lips pinched together.

“Why did you invite us to your place in the first place?” asked Jupiter. “To be honest, it only came to Bob’s attention that we were not in the grotto, but only in a small cave by the cove.”

“I knew you were persistent,” said Mrs Roskin. “I wanted to see for myself if you sensed any more secrets. I elicited from you that you knew about this drug thing.”

“Actually, I wanted to provoke you with that,” Bob clarified.

“Ha!” she said, “and I wanted you to consider the case closed.”

“—Not when we suspect that there are still unfinished business,” Jupiter said, “and when did you know about Devlin’s animal trade in the cave by the cove?”

“For about a month. We wanted to drive him away, of course.”

“—With the fake collapse noise. How did you get the idea?”

“Due to a carelessness on Vince’s part! A propane bottle had overheated and exploded—that was a month ago and it almost set the laboratory ablaze. From the grotto, the noise reverberated both into the sanatorium and up to the cave in front. The explosion gave us the idea that we could simulate tremors. We piled up some rubble at the edge of the grotto and deliberately detonated a small propane bottle underneath it when we knew Devlin was in the cave. With a blast, the rubble crashed against the wall—that was it. All completely harmless, actually.”

“Didn’t sound harmless at all,” Bob said.

“Now I get the full picture,” Jupe said and turned to Zach Canning. “The first time we saw you at the ruins above, Devlin was already in the cave by the cove. You knew that through Nicole’s security cameras, but did not actually go after him as you claimed.

“We followed you to the lower ground floor but lost track. However, we saw the gate leading to the collapsed staircase. In fact, you went through the gate and locked it back, to come into this grotto to create the fake tremor to scare Devlin off. Bob heard the fake collapse noise and both of us ran back to the public car park.

“Later you also left and went off in your van, with Pete following you. Bob and I then returned to the lower ground floor of the building and saw Devlin coming back to get the transport container. I suspect that he brought more than one container that day so he had to make several trips down to the cove.”

“Thanks to you meddling rascals—” Mrs Roskin sneered.

“—And disaster took its course for the drug queen,” Bob finished her sentence with satisfaction.

“Another question...” Jupiter continued, “the dolphin that Mr Canning abducted—he was already trained to run errands, right?”

“The dolphin had been in service for over a year when he was injured by a propeller at sea,” Zach now spoke up. “I arranged for him to come to the dolphinarium where we could care for him. It was a foregone conclusion that we would end up getting him back.”

“Of course, and then put the blame on David Hill for abducting the dolphin,” Pete said. “Mighty ingenious!”

“Enough questions now,” Captain Gentry said. “This will all come up in the police interrogation as well.”

“Just one more,” Jupiter requested. “The dolphins are probably taking the drugs to boats out in the open sea, but where are they delivered to?”

“I can answer that,” the captain said. “As I said, we have known for a long time that there must be a laboratory in this area. It supplies Hawaii. There have been big drug problems there for years. We knew that the smuggling was going on by sea, but the surveillance of the coasts was unsuccessful. Who would have thought that dolphins would be abused as drug mules?”

Jupiter grinned. “We think that anything is possible... and this case has proven that is so!”

Bob then turned to Captain Gentry and said: “Thank you for responding immediately and helping me.”

“That’s our motto in the Coast Guard,” the captain said. “‘*Semper paratus*’—always ready! ... But we always have so much to do, so very often we rely on the help and cooperation from the public...”

Jupiter grinned again. “That’s where The Three Investigators come in... true to our motto...”

“—Which is?”

“‘We Investigate Anything’!”